
Gakusen Toshi Asterisk Volume4

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 4



学戦都市

三屋咲ゆう

illustration: okiura

イノ

04. 追憶闕破

つい
おくとう
は

三屋咲ゆう
illustration: okiura



学戦都市 アリス

04. つい
おくとうは
追憶闖破

《万有天羅》

范星露

(ファンジンルー)

FAN XINGLU

Fan Xinglu

Li Shenyun

《幻映霧散》

黎沈雲

(リーシェンユン)

LI SHENYUN

《幻映創起》

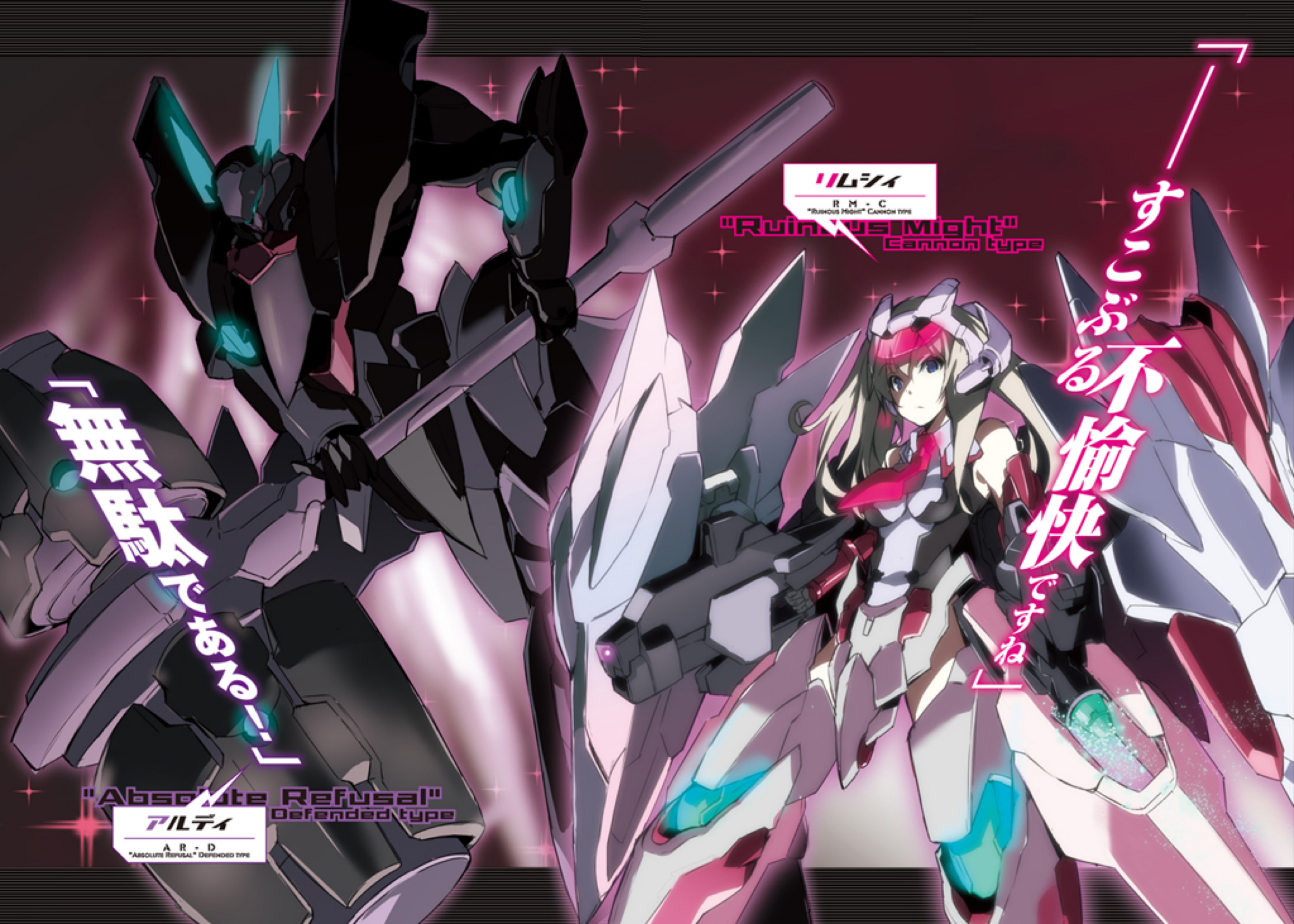
黎沈華

(リーシェンホワ)

LI SHENHUA

Li Shenhua





/// **ルミナ** **ルミナ**
R M - C
"Ruinous Might" Cannon type

"Ruinous Might"
Cannon type

すこぶる不愉快

ですね

「無駄でもover」

"Absolute Refusal"
Defended type

/// **アイル** **アイル**
A R - D
"Absolute Refusal" Defended type

水上学園都市“六花”



クインヴェール女学園

校章は冀望の象徴たる名もなき女神「偶像」。明るくきらびやかな校風で、入学条件に戦闘能力や学力にプラスして「容姿」を要求している。規模は六学園中最小。



星導館学園

校章は不撓の象徴たる赤い蓮の花「赤蓮」。生徒の自主性を重んじる自由な校風で、校則も緩やか。伝統的に《魔女》や《魔術師》の学生が多い。



聖ガラードワース学園

校章は秩序の象徴たる太陽の輪「光輪」。規律と忠誠を絶対とした厳格な校風で、決闘についても原則的には禁じている。そのためレヴォルフとは折り合いが悪い。

北関東多重クレーター湖上に浮かぶ水上学園都市。ほぼ正六角形で、それぞれの角から稜堡のように六つの学園が外側へ競り出している。各学園からはそれぞれ対角までメインストリートが伸び、その姿からアスタリスクと呼ばれるようになった。

世界最大の総合バトルエンターテインメント《星武祭》の舞台であり、世界屈指の観光都市でもある。

名目上は日本に所属しているものの、複数の統合企業財体が直轄統治しているため完全に治外法権状態となっている。

商業エリア

メインステージ

中央区

行政エリア

外縁居住区



レヴォルフ黒学院

校章は覇道の象徴たる二本の剣「双剣」。非常に好戦的な校風で、積極的に生徒の決闘を推奨している。そのためガラードワースとは折り合いが悪い。



界龍(ジェロン)第七学院

校章は帝王の象徴たる四神の長「黄龍」。官僚主義と放任主義が絡み合う混沌とした校風で、あらゆる面でオリエンタルな雰囲気がある。六学園中最大の規模を誇る。



アルカント・アカデミー

校章は叡智の象徴たるミネルバの使い「昏鳥」。徹底した成果主義を奉じる校風で、学生は研究クラスと実践クラスの二つに大別される。落星工学の技術においては他学園の追随を許さない。



星導館学園

天霧綾斗 [あまぎり・あやと]



星導館学園高等部へ転入してきた特待生。のんびりしているが、莫大な星辰力と突出した剣才を持つ。

二つ名: ^{むらくも}《霧雲》
純星煌式武装: ^{セルベレスタ}《黒炉の魔剣》

ユリス=アレクシア・フォン・リースフェルト Julis=Alexia van Riessfeld



リーゼルトニアの王女にして星導館学園の序列五位。綾斗とタッグを組み、《星武祭》の制覇を目指す。

二つ名: ^{グリューエンローゼ}《華焰の魔女》
煌式武装: 《アスベラ・スピーナ》

クローディア・エンフィールド Claudia Enfield



星導館学園の生徒会長。綾斗を学園に引き入れた張本人。いつも穏やかに微笑んでいるが、本人曰く、相当に“腹黒い”らしい。学園内の序列は二位。

二つ名: ^{バルカ・モルタ}《千見の盟主》
純星煌式武装: 《パン=ドラ》

沙々宮紗夜 [ささみや・さや]



小学校時代に天霧家の隣に住んでいた綾斗の幼なじみ。つねに眠そうで無表情。大艦巨砲主義であり、巨大銃を自在にスイッチさせて戦う。

二つ名: 未登録
煌式武装: 三十八式煌型擲弾銃ヘルネクラウム、三十四式波動重砲アークヴァンデルス改 ^{ほか}

刀藤綺凜 [とうとう・きりん]



中等部一年生。弱冠十三歳にして星導館学園序列一位の座につく。門下生一万を超える刀藤流宗家の末っ子であり、剣術に関しては天賦の才を持つ。

二つ名: ^{しつぷうじんらい}《疾風刃雷》
煌式武装: なし(日本刀「千羽切」を愛用している)

夜吹英士郎 [やぶき・えいしろう]

新聞部に所属する事情通の少年。綾斗とは寮の同室。特務機関《影星》所属。

レスター・マクフェイル Lester MacPhail

^{コルネフォロス}《轟遠の烈斧》の二つ名を持つ。序列九位。

ランディ・フック Randy Hooke

レスターのタッグパートナー。

谷津崎匡子 [やつざき・きょうこ]

綾斗たちのクラスを担当する女性教師。かつては《獅鷲星武祭》を制したこともある実力者。

前巻までのあらすじ

《鳳凰星武祭》開幕!

危なげなく予選を突破した綾斗&ユリスに、レヴォルフの刺客、《吸血暴姫》イレーネ・ウルサイスが牙をむく。イレーネの純星煌式武装、《霸潰の血鎌》の暴走によって窮地に陥る綾斗たちだったが、ユリスの大技もあり辛うじて勝利を拾う。だが、その代償は高かった。

ついに“時間制限付き”という弱点がバレてしまった綾斗。

暗雲立ちこめる五回戦が、始まろうとしていた――。

character



アルカント・アカデミー

エルネスタ・キューネ *Ernesta Kuhne*

アルカントが誇る落星工学の天才。《人形派》筆頭。

カミラ・パレート *Camilla Pareto*

専門分野は煌式武装の研究開発。エルネスタとは腐れ縁の仲。《獅子派》筆頭。

アルディ *"Absolute Refusal" Defended type*

エルネスタによって作られた自律式擬形体AR-D

リムシィ *"Ruinous Might" Cannon type*

エルネスタによって作られた自律式擬形体RM-C



レヴォルフ黒学院

ディルク・エーベルヴァイン *Dirk Eberwein*

《悪辣の王》と称される悪魔的頭脳を持つ青年。レヴォルフ初の非《星脈世代》生徒会長。

樗丸ころな *【かしまるころな】*

生徒会長秘書。序列外。《星脈世代》だが戦闘能力は皆無。

イレネ・ウルサイズ *Irene Urzaiz*

序列三位。《吸血暴姫》の二つ名を持つ。

プリシラ・ウルサイズ *Priscilla Urzaiz*

序列外。イレネの妹で、非常に珍しい再生能力者。



聖ガラードワース学園

アーネスト・フェアクロフ *Ernest Fairclough*

聖ガラードワース学園の生徒会長。序列一位。二つ名は《聖騎士》。

レティシア・ブランシャール *Letitia Blanchard*

聖ガラードワース学園の生徒会副会長。序列二位。二つ名は《光翼の魔女》。



界龍第七学院

范星露 *【ファン・シンルー】*

界龍第七学院の生徒会長。九歳。序列一位。《万有天羅》の二つ名を持ち、アスタリスク屈指の戦闘力を誇る。

趙虎峰 *【ジャオ・フーフォン】*

序列五位。稀代の拳士にして星露の弟子。二つ名は《天奇武群》。

黎沈雲・黎沈華 *【リー・シェンユン/リー・シェンファ】*

双子の兄妹であり、序列九位（沈雲）と十位（沈華）。二つ名は《幻映創起》と《幻映霧散》。

宋・羅 *【ソン・ルオ】*

五回戦で綾斗たちと対戦した星露の門下生。序列二十位・二十三位。



クインヴェール女学園

COMING SOON!

その他

マディアス・メサ *Madiath Mesa*

《星武祭》運営委員長。各学園のスポンサーである複数の統合企業財体から全権を任されている。

梁瀬ミーコ *【やなせ・ミーコ】*

《鳳凰星武祭》の実況アナウンサー。クインヴェールOG。

ファム・ティ・チャム *Pham Thi Tram*

《鳳凰星武祭》の解説。界龍OG。二十五歳。

フローラ・クレム *Flora Klemm*

ユリスが支援している孤児院の女の子。十歳。

天霧 遥 *【あまぎり・はるか】*

綾斗の姉。五年前に失踪。

character

Chapter 1 - The Master of World Dragon

The entire site of the World Dragon Seventh Institute, which was located in the southeast area of Asterisk, was covered with innumerable buildings connected by corridors. It was dotted with gardens and open spaces, as the buildings were surrounded by them, which mimicked the traditional Chinese-style architecture. It's entire architectural aspect, rather than being an academy, was probably more like a huge palace.

At one corner, there was a building called the Yellow Dragon Temple. At first glance, it was not that much different from other multistoried buildings of three-layer structure, and it had a roof of yellow lapis lazuli tiles in vermillion-lacquered pillars. In fact, any student enrolled in World Dragon knew well how special this place was.

—No, to be exact, what was special was not the place. But its Master.

It was the person, who inherited the nickname of <Divine Revelations>.

It was the person, who reigned in World Dragon.

The name of the person, who had been placed in the seat three years ago, at just the age of six, was Fan XingLu.

“Master, it is soon time for the regular report meeting.” Zhao HuFeng announced after a short pause.

At the entrance of the hall Zhao HuFeng took the stance of Bao Qan^[1] with the right fist in the left palm.

HuFeng was ranked #5 in World Dragon Seventh Institute. Although he had a well-trained body, he was of short stature; and though he might be mistaken for a girl, due to his softly refined features and long hair, he was a full-fledged 17-year-old male student. Once highly hailed as a prodigy he had splendidly finished second in the previous Phoenix.

In fact, as HuFeng recalled himself at that time, he almost fainted in agony for he was like an ignorant frog in a well^[2].

“Oh, it’s already that time, huh.”

The little girl, who was standing in the middle of the hall turned her face to that voice, and returned an innocent smile.

She was a lovely girl, who tied her long black hair round like butterfly wings, and whom the World Dragon’s uniform, which had the appearance of an ancient custom, suited well. Her height reached to HuFeng’s chest.

It wasn’t exactly too far-fetched, but for those who knew nothing, they would likely find it hard to believe that this small girl was the <Divine Revelations> Fan XingLu, rank #1 in World Dragon Seventh Institute, which boasted of the largest scale of Asterisk.

“Then, we will leave it as that for now. Everyone, thank you for your hard work. I will accept a challenge again at any time.”

XingLu said so and looked around the hall. Dozens of students were lying on the floor gasping for breath.

They were all those who wished for apprenticeship to XingLu.



Presently... XingLu's personal pupils numbered about fifty. When considering the entirety of World Dragon, there were by no means many, because there were also World Dragon sects having several hundred disciples. However. All of those fifty people all had their names recorded in the Named Charts of World Dragon, and as for the Top Twelve, eleven among the twelve names were XingLu's disciples.

In other words, one might say that most of the strong people in World Dragon were XingLu's disciples.

"Was there not any successful applicants this time... Either?"

"Yes. Unfortunately."

They left the hall and advanced along the corridor overlooking the courtyard.

In order to become a disciple of XingLu, one must just clear a very simple test. It was just to touch XingLu within a certain time. Just that.

However... HuFeng knew from experience how much 'just that' was difficult. Even when dozens of students, who had confidence in their abilities, joined forces, they were not able to lay a finger on her small body. Even though XingLu did nothing but merely dodge or ignore the attack and didn't even ward off their hands.

"—By the way HuFeng. Did you see today's match?"

"By today's match, do you mean in the Phoenix?"

Of course, HuFeng was also checking the matches of his comrades. Nine pairs of World Dragon advanced to the main battle (final stage), and five pairs, which finished today's fourth round, entered in the best 16; this was the most among the six academies. In addition to it, those pairs were eventually XingLu's disciples, too.

"There was one interesting boy. You know, the rank #1 of Seidoukan — if I'm not mistaken, it is called Amagiri Ayato. The puppets of Allekant were also quite good but, in terms of material, that boy is the number one. He's really interesting."

"Ah, you talk about the eleventh match, right?"

She was talking about the match where the pair of Seidoukan's rank #1 and the pair of Le Wolfe's rank #3 clashed. In the fight between Ogre Lux users, both of them were considerably skilled.

However...

"It seemed that his power is somehow restricted."

The intelligence agency of the academy had already collected a fair amount of information. According to it, it seemed that, he was able to maintain his full power state for only an extremely limited time. Even though it was still conjecture.

In addition, there was also the rumor, which said that once he pulled out that power, a certain interval was necessary in order to use it once again. In fact though, since the leak source of this

rumor seemed to be Le Wolfe, it was questionable how far it was credible.

“It's probably the ability of a Strega or Dante. Hmm, isn't that also interesting?”

“If I'm not mistaken, their next opponent will be Song and Luo..”

Song and Luo were disciples junior to HuFeng and veterans... Who had their names recorded in the Named Charts.

“Yes. I look forward to see how they will attack.”

If one thought normally... A rank #1 was nothing more than a formidable opponent. Apparently. Their ability was the real deal.

But, the time limit was a weakness, which could be called definite. One could attack as much as he wanted, and fully conquer.

Assuming that the rumor of the ‘interval’ was also true, given the strength of Song and Luo, one might say that it was improbable that they would lose. Though the other member of the pair, the ^{Gruene Rose} Petalblaze Witch, rank #5 of Seidoukan, was also quite skilled, once drawn into close range combat, in a situation of two-to-one, she would be overpowered.

“Well, anyway, I took a liking to Amagiri Ayato. His groundings are good, and he seems to have backbone as such, too. I want him; I really want him as disciple, by all means. If it's him,

with five years — no, even with three years of training, he will become a good playmate^[3] to entertain me.”

“...Are you dissatisfied with only us?” HuFeng said slightly sullenly.

As XingLu cacklingly laughed.

“It isn’t the case. But... Such a thing is like a meal. And it’s better to enjoy various tastes, isn’t it?”

“Hah...”

“For example. The captain of the Star Hunter Guards was delicious. Despite being blessed with an ability, it’s impressive how he admirably reached up to that level just with a study of only a few decades. I would like to have another bout with him, but I have apparently been disliked by him in any way.”

As XingLu was thinking about the past... She wistfully talked with a distant look.

“If I am to personally train Amagiri Ayato, he will be able to reach that level, too. Hah, it’s really regrettable. Why didn’t he come to World Dragon...? HuFeng, can’t you somehow do something about it now?”

“Even if you say so...”

The students of the six academies, once they enrolled an academy, were generally not permitted to transfer to another.

“...Huh? No, please wait a moment.”

HuFeng suddenly noticed there.

“Wasn’t Master in the middle of looking after the entering applicants when that match was broadcast ...?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“So what...?”

To XingLu, who plainly said, HuFeng held his forehead.

“Don’t tell me — you were watching it? While taking care of them?”

“It was just the right handicap, wasn’t it?”

XingLu took out her portable terminal and chuckled.

“Hah... Please think a little about their feelings. After all, it would have normally shattered their confidence.”

“There might be also people, who roused themselves, right? You’re too serious.”

To XingLu ignoring his remonstrance without any hesitation, HuFeng responded with a sigh.

“...Excuse me, but it is not that I am too serious, it is just that Master’s desire to play is too much. Please restrain yourself a little.”

“It is an advice I cannot consider. I am merely here to enjoy myself. No one can stop it. For what do you think that title of <Divine Revelations> is?”

It was a nonsensical excuse, yet at the same time it was also an undeniable fact.

<Divine Revelations> was an absolute name, which surpassed any authority in World Dragon. Even the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, which was a partner, was not an exception.

Though it felt like they walked some distance since they left the hall, the corridor seemed to continue forever without end. Even judging from the number of rooms lined up on both sides, it was obviously not on the scale that would be realized within Yellow Dragon Temple. Considering the size of the Yellow Dragon Temple as seen from the outside. The inside was surely wider and bigger.

On earth with whatever kind of technology this had been made — no, in the first place, how many rooms there were in the Yellow Dragon Temple, what kind of structure it became, No one beside XingLu knew it. After all, even HuFeng, who was acknowledged to be XingLu’s disciple number three, could not get into the rooms without XingLu’s permission.

It’s said that it was the first generation <Divine Revelations> was who constructed this multistoried building, and at that, in only one night. Just by herself.

Only the one, who could open the door of this Yellow Dragon Temple, would take over the nickname of <Divine Revelations>.

In fact, even including XingLu, there were only three people who bore that nickname.

The first generation <Divine Revelations> appeared in the early days of Asterisk, and it was a person named as the World Dragon's founder, who brought the mana-induction capability generalization technique called Star Senjutsu. She was a great figure who alone built the Yellow Dragon Temple, brought up the teaching masters of the Star Senjutsu, and established the foundation of World Dragon; On the other hand, it was said that, she concluded various personal secret agreements with the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Just before leaving World Dragon, she nominated "the person who will be able to open the door of the Yellow Dragon Temple" as her successor. Afterward, It is said that ,many students had challenged to open the door. None among them accomplished it.

It was then several years later that the second generation < Divine Revelations> appeared. It was a person, who opened the door of the Yellow Dragon Temple, which only responded to a specific prana, and achieved the first Grand Cross in Asterisk's history. Even after graduation, she strived to nurture the next generation as a teacher, and she was called the ancestor of World Dragon revival. Similarly just before leaving World Dragon, she left the same words as the first generation (founder).

And it was three years ago that the third generation <Divine Revelations>, XingLu, appeared in this academy. About ten years after the second generation disappeared, when she, who was very young, easily opened the door of the Yellow Dragon Temple, which no one was able to open until then, she was immediately established as its Master as if it was a matter of fact.

Although there were various rumors even within World Dragon regarding the behavior and knowledge suitable for her age and her conduct to the fact that she was familiar with every corner of the Yellow Dragon Temple, XingLu herself did not mention it, and HuFeng also did not care about it nowadays.

A Master is to the bitter end a Master. And that's enough.

“—So you were here, Master. We were looking for you.”

“Oh, even brother [\[4\]](#) Zhao is there. Please excuse me for the long silence.”

A pair, boy and girl, who were walking from the opposite side of the corridor, respectfully took the stance of Bao Qan before the two people.

HuFeng's eyebrows slightly dropped, but XingLu stopped with her unchanged innocent smile.

“Oh, it's you two, huh. Do you want something from me?”

As XingLu asked so, the two people also pleasantly squinted.

“No, it’s not so much, but”

“We have come to report today’s victory.”

The young girl took over the young boy’s words so as to follow.

It was as if they were speaking like one person, as if it was not unnatural at all. On the contrary, they were in a perfect harmony to the extent that it was uncanny (creepy).

The young boy’s name was Li ShenYun, and the young girl’s was Li ShenHua. As the name showed, they were twin brother and sister, and they were respectively ranked #9 and #10, thus having their name entered in the Top Twelve of World Dragon.

As might be expected from twins, their figures were also similar ; except that ShenHua had gathered her hair in a chignon^[5], they were almost indistinguishable.

“Yeah, I watched it. It was quite a stunning victory.”

“No, no, after all we”

“Still need to train much more.”

Even while saying so, pride, which could not be concealed in the two people’s words, was oozing.

It also looked like there was some kind of arrogance there, and an overwhelming confidence could be felt.

“Hmm. Never mind. Just get to the main point.”

“Hahaha. We are no match for you, Master. Well, then...”

As ShenYun cut his words once there, he revealed a fearless smile.

“Since it looks like at this rate we will clash with the pair of Brother Song in the sixth round”

“We have thought that we should carry out word of it to Master , just in case.”

To these words, XingLu wonderingly looked puzzled.

“It is not rare for students of a same academy to fight in the Festa. So there is no reason for me to be against it.”

“Well, it is true, but... How should I put it, there are many points where, we are unable to get along well with the members of the Wood faction.”

“There were also quite a few troubles, After all...”

To the twins, who revealed a nasty smirk, the wrinkles between HuFeng’s eyebrows deepened.

The disciples of XingLu were greatly classified in two great factions. One was the Wood faction, a group of people, who mainly trained on Taijutsu, and the other was the Water faction, a group of people, who mainly focused on Star Senjutsu. For various

reasons, among the Taoists (Taoshi) belonging to the Water faction , there were people, who looked down on the fist warriors of the Wood faction; One could say that their relation was hardly good.

The twins were the typical example of such Taoshi.

“I don’t understand what you are talking about. How about speaking clearly?”

Prompted by XingLu, the twins exchanged meaningful glances.

“In other words — in case we were to clash with the members of the Wood faction”

“And it happens that we somewhat overdo it; Something like that.”

“Wha-...!”

Even HuFeng, who was restraining himself because he was in front of his Master, as expected, changed his complexion somewhat.

In other words, they were saying that personal grudges would be settled under the pretext of a match. From a certain viewpoint, to summarize the Wood faction, they could not remain silent.

“Hohoho. You should have said so from the beginning. Honestly. How sluggish you are.”

—But, XingLu held back such HuFeng with one hand and calmly nodded.

"You may do as you like. Since it was for that unspecified purpose, that I granted you power, I have no interest in dictating you the path to take."

"Master...!"

Ignoring HuFeng, who unintentionally raised his voice, the twins contentedly bowed.

"As expected, Master is broad-minded."

"We are impressed."

Saying so, they opened the way just after finishing their business.

Though it was a thought that made HuFeng grinding his teeth, he could not help but abide if XingLu, who was the master, said so

However, while passing in front of the twins, who opened the way, XingLu teasingly said.

"—But, I wonder if it will really go just as you expect."

The twins' eyebrows twitchily moved.

"Meaning... that we will fall behind Brother Song and Luo?"

"No. I am just saying that it is still too early to label your opponents."

XingLu, who looked at the twins' faces, which seemed to be doubtful, and stopped, pleasantly rumbled her throat.

"Kukuku, we do not know yet whether Song and Luo will win through this, right?"

"—Oh... I see. No. But"

"Even if it is Song and Luo, I do not think they may lose to an opponent who revealed a weakness as openly as that."

"It is to say that, to that extent, we value the ability of our brothers."

Though, their manner of speaking was extremely haughty, HuFeng also agreed to what they said.

There wasn't much data on Amagiri Ayato, but as far as they saw, in some of the videos which appeared on the market, there was quite a great difference of power between when he was at full strength and when he was not. They could not imagine that Song and Luo would be defeated by him in the state where his power was restricted; and once Amagiri Ayato would be defeated, there was no way they would lose in a two-to-one fight against the other member of the pair. The Petalblaze Witch.

"Fufufu, well, it's fine. More importantly. You should first be thinking about the fifth round... Too. There is no telling what may happen in a match."

"Hahaha, we appreciate your concern, but"

“By luck of Combination... Our next opponents are the girls of Queen Veil who had been missing. You do not need to worry.”

To the twins, who casually ignored XingLu’s advice, HuFeng’s face became steep again.

“Oops, it’s already such time, huh.”

“Well then, excuse us.”

HuFeng saw off the twins, who said so and left, with a sigh.

“Honesty. When it comes to those twins...”

“Hohoho. I see that you do not like them.”

“They are really very arrogant and they also neglect respect and modesty. There is no way that I can get along with them.”

While following behind XingLu, who had once again begun to walk, HuFeng complained.

It was a fact that the Taoshi of the Water faction tended to look down on the fist Warriors of the Wood faction, but naturally every single one of them was not like those twins. For example, HuFeng’s elder sister disciple, who established the Water faction, though a little daring, was a respectable person.

In the end, that much wickedness, was nothing but the problem of the persons themselves.

“But, they have talent.”

“That... I won't deny it.”

In fact, as the twins said, in case their pair was to clash with the pair of Song and Luo, It was almost certain that the former would win.

HuFeng did not also feel like losing if he were to take on either one, but when it came to face those twins at the same time, even if he did not lose, he could not deny that he would have a hard time.

If only focusing on the perspective of combination there was nobody among XingLu's disciples who was better than those twins

“By the way, does Master think that Song and Luo will lose against the Seidoukan pair?”

“Hohoho. I wonder how it will be.”

To HuFeng's question, XingLu returned a meaningful laughter.

“If tomorrow — it was not Song and Luo, but those twins, who were to fight them in the fifth round, I think that Amagiri Ayato and his partner would have lost.”

“Then... Even if the pair of Seidoukan was to take down Song and Luo tomorrow, do you say that they would lose to those twins in the sixth round —— the quarterfinal?”

Then, XingLu looked back, teasingly smiled and shook her head

“No. If they were to get over tomorrow’s match, it would be hard to say who would win. I look forward to it.”

“Hah...”

To XingLu’s words, which did not quite get to the point, HuFeng slightly perplexed tilted his head to the side.

To begin with, since XingLu was also the student council president of World Dragon, she should not originally expect the students of her academy to lose.

HuFeng was at a loss for an instant of whether or not he should complain about it, but he gave it up after seeing XingLu, who happily shook her shoulder.

In any case, there was no way that she would listen.

—Phoenix, the 11th day.

“Geez, it spread out so far in just one day.”

As she entered the waiting room of the Sirius Dome, which she got completely used to, the stunned Julis welcomed Ayato with a herd of space windows of various sizes.

“Good morning, Julis.”

“Good morning, Ayato. How do you feel now that your weakness has been exposed to the whole world?”

Instead of answering, Ayato, lightly throwing out his shoulders, sat down in front of Julis across the table.

“As you can see, the information has not yet gone beyond the level of an uncertain guess, but... More detailed data, which the secret intelligence service of each academy investigated, would probably be passed to players.”

“...How long do you think it will take until it is disclosed?”

Though any Phoenix-related articles, that seemed to be projected in the space window accessed news, all the headings were just things related to Ayato. Nonetheless, with “A major weakness confirmed for a top favorite!?” or “Seidoukan Supernova with time limit!?” and so on, the conclusion was barely avoided in the news.

But, certainly the secret intelligence service of each academy was not so sweet.

“I wonder... Well. It would be better to assume that they get as much information as Claudia everywhere.”

Except Julis, those, to whom Ayato spoke about his seal, were only Saya, Kirin and Lester.

He spoke about it to Claudia when she came after the match yesterday, but at that point, Claudia knew about the seal to some extent.

『*I am sorry. But, it is also my job after all.*』

Claudia said, during an earlier space window call, and apologetically bowed her head. But, since she did not say more than that, Ayato did not know since when and how she got to know it. But, still, he had a rough guess.

It was probably due to the work of the aforementioned intelligence agency — <Shadow Star>. And if so, like Julis said, it would be no wonder even if the intelligence agency of other academies held as much information.

—Of course, since the <Shadow Star> was comprised of students from the same academy, they definitely had an advantage from it over other academies.

“For the time being, it would be better to assume that the rough time limit was exposed. They will take the match with Irene Urzaiz as a basis for it.”

“Well... I guess.”

That point was already unavoidable. They had no choice, but to give up.

“The problem now is that the backlash you experience, from the breaking of your seal, was also exposed.”

Said Julis. Who expanded a nearby space window and examined the news displayed.

Articles about the person concerned, saying “There are rumors saying that once he released his power, he could not apparently move his body for a while due to a backlash. They say that when this happens, to go all out once again, a certain interval (amount of time) is necessary...” could be found there.

“According to Claudia, it seems that the source of this rumor was Le Wolfe.”

“Le Wolfe, huh...”

It was not like he was unaware of it.

It seemed that the student council president of Le Wolfe knew Ayato’s big sister. If so, then it would not be strange if he also knew about his sister’s ability — the binding chains of imprisonment, which sealed Ayato’s power.

“That <Tyrant> bastard, it would have been fine if he kept what he knew as a secret, but to purposefully leak it as though to propagate it, he did quite the harassment.”

When Julis said so with a sigh, she closed all the space windows and looked at Ayato.

“—So, how is your current body condition?”

“Not bad, I guess. Well, it still hurts a little though.”

Ayato showed it by moving his arms while saying so.

In the first place, it was not some kind of damage in the flesh, which caused the backlash of breaking the seal, but rather the overreaction of prana due to the reactivation of the seal. That was why it calmed down only after a certain period of time.

“For now, I think that I will recover at least to the extent that there will be almost no problem by the match. To the extent of fighting normally, that is.”

“Is it, after all, impossible for you to fight with all your might?”

“Yeah... It’s a little tough. I guess.”

Ayato checked the time with a glance on the side. It was within the time one could say that it was still the early morning, and even the first game had not yet begun. Since Ayato and Julis’ match was the third of the day, there was still about a half day time. Ayato would probably considerably recover if he rested until then, but it would be impossible to break the seal a second time.

After all, let alone the three minutes he had as a standard, he fought yesterday with all his might, pretty much going beyond five minutes, which was the red line. The backlash was also prolonged by just that much.

“I understand. Then, let’s come up with a strategy taking that into consideration.”

Julis took a deep breath and once again opened a space window . However, what was projected there this time was not the site of the news system, but two fearless young men.

“It’s a review, but our next opponent is the pair of the rank #20 and #23 of World Dragon. We also clashed with a pair of World Dragon in the third round, but it won’t be an exaggeration to say that the opponent this time is special. After all, they are the direct disciples of that <Divine Revelations>.”

“The student council president of World Dragon. Right? I have heard that she is only a 9-year-old.”

Though it was not conceivable as common sense. It seemed like she was the strongest student at World Dragon.

The match videos of her also hardly existed, and even if there were some, most were matches that ended in an instant, and they were not of use as reference. Even though knowing that they were strong, they could not measure how much strong they were.

“I don’t know that much about <Divine Revelations>. Since there is also the fact that World Dragon has many students, it’s an academy, where information is relatively leaked and easy to access, but it’s only in that area that their guard is firm. I know at least that it’s the nickname, which had been beared by the person, who once accomplished a legendary feat in World Dragon.”

As Julis cut off, at that point, she looked straight in Ayato’s eyes

.

“Well. It’s fine. Anyway, it means that the next opponents are those against whom we must not let our guard down... That said, if you were in a perfect condition, we would not have any difficulty in winning. At least, they are not of Irene Urzaiz’s level after all.”

“It will be a hassle if they are also on edge like Irene.”

He recalled yesterday’s match. Although they somehow won... One wrong step and the outcome would have been reversed. Or worse.

“But still, with your current power, it’s a slightly burdensome opponent.”

“Ugh...”

She was absolutely right.

Ayato in his sealed state did not have enough power to be able to fight an up-and-coming student.

“Although I would not fall behind in case of a one-on-one, it would be quite tough if I was to deal with the two. Especially since both of them are players specialized in close range combat. I somewhat also intend to level up my skill in close range combat, but it’s mere pretension^[6] after all. Leaving aside the lower ranked opponents, with this much skill, I will be at disadvantage if they stepped into my range.”

“—Do you have some plan?”

Though it was not unskillful to think of a strategy for which Ayato could use his individual power, including Julis — in other words, when thinking about a strategy in pair, Julis was much better.

Then, Julis raised two fingers with a difficult face.

“Before that, there are two things I want to confirm. The first thing is; Something I have thought about since the time of training but, only just that, your defense is quite something even in sealed state. What does that mean? You also fairly endured my assaults the first time, when you and I fought, right?”

Julis was probably talking about the duel with her in the first day of his transfer.

“Ah, yeah. If it is just dodging or defending, I can somehow manage with experience and prediction. Though I say that, since my body won’t follow, I think that it’ll gradually become reduced to a poor situation as the opponent is a higher ranker, but...”

If they had continued (the duel) like that at that time, Ayato would have definitely been roast to well-done by Julis' flame.

Also during the practice match against Lester and Saya, he was not able to deal with the strength of Lester's physical attacks even if he understood it.

As expected, if he was considerably inferior in basic specs, it would mean that there was a limitation to what followed with techniques.

When thinking, of somehow going about it there, suitable tactics were necessary.

"Hmm... I understand. The second thing then; Can that technique of releasing your power be used only for a moment even in your current state?"

"Well, honestly, it's hard now, but...I think that I have recovered enough to be able to do it only once during the match."

"I see..."

Since he could not assert, it had become a vague way of talking, but when Julis, who heard it, looked down with a serious expression, she put a finger on her chin and was brooding over something.

She was just like that, for a while.

"—All right, then what do you say about this plan?"

Julis, who eventually looked up, said so while grinning.

Chapter 2 – The Fifth Round

『"Well, well, it's finally today's most noteworthy card, the final match of the fifth round! It's the entrance of the Seidoukan Academy's rank #1, player Amagiri Ayato as well as the rank #5, player Julis-Alexia Van Riessfeld, who were engaged in a fierce battle with the rank #3 of Le Wolfe Black Institute, player Irene Urzaiz alias the <The Violent Vampire Princess> in the fourth round yesterday!"』

As they entered the stage, the quite familiar voice of commentary and an unprecedented excited cheering welcomed Ayato and Julis.

Certainly, getting rapidly excited considering the finals as the peak was probably stereotyped (usual), but the meaning of today's cheering was somewhat different.

Everyone probably wanted to confirm with their own eyes whether or not the contents, which were reported, were true.

『"And making their appearance from the entrance gate on the other side are player Song and player Luo of World Dragon Seventh Institute! Though these two can be considered as juniors for you, Tram-san, how do you view this match?"』

『"Let's see. To put things bluntly, if the reported contents are true, I think that the pair of player Song and player Luo is advantageous..."』

『"I guess that today's audience is also paying attention on that point."

Ayato, while hearing such exchanges, once again pondered about the prana flowing throughout his body and checked its movement.

"—Okay."

He seemed to have recovered to a certain extent.

What was left (remained).....

"Amagiri-kun."

Then, one of the youths of World Dragon, who was an opponent, called out to Ayato there.

If he was not mistaken, he was named Song. Somewhat older than Ayato, he had a body toned by being well trained.

Ayato almost unintentionally braced himself, but the youth with pigtail slowly opened his mouth as he straightly gazed at Ayato.

"Regardless of whether or not the various rumors are true, both Luo and I shall fight with all our might. Frankly speaking, I also wanted to exchange fists with you in your full power state, but, this is to the bitter end a Phoenix tag battle. Please don't think badly of me."

"Eh? Ah, no, don't be..."

As Ayato was surprised at the unexpected words. Song turned his back around and returned to the other player's, — Luo's, side.

Luo was also probably older than Ayato since he seemed to be about the same age as Song. Though his physique was about the same as Song's, he was a youth, with black hair trimmed short who held a deeply impressive staff in his hand. Similarly to Song, he had a look that seemed honest.

The staff was not a Lux and seemed to be made of metal. It was quite long extending to about two meters.

"I see. He is without doubt a warrior in the proper sense of term."

Then, Julis who was in the rear muttered as she was impressed.

"So, there are also people like that. I was a little surprised."

"There seems to be a great number of people of that type in Garrardsworth and World Dragon, but it is really conscientious of him to expressly come make his declaration. Well, anyway they will probably check at first if you can't really fight with all your power. And maybe — they will immediately see through."

"I guess..."

The discipline and training Song cultivated into his prana they both felt in their proximity was considerable. That was not something with which he was born with but probably the fruit of pure effort. It was something that was kneaded well, little by little,

for years. As he also seemed to have a considerable amount of experience, fooling the eyes of such a stalwart veteran for any length of time would be nearly impossible.

“It looks like it was the right choice to have elaborated a plan after all. —Okay, listen Ayato. Here is the mark. Firmly keep it in mind.”

As Julis activated Aspera Spina, she chopped an asterisk at their feet with its tip.

“Roger. Should I assume that the signal will be the fireworks?”

“Yes, the postponement will be five minutes from the activation of the ‘wall’. You have to clear the conditions by then.”

As he checked so while recalling the strategy meeting until a while ago, Julis slightly nodded.

“Though it’ll be tough, you must first hold out until my preparations are completed. Just in case, I also intend to make a little diversion, but at best it will just hold them to some extent as I carry out preparations. As to whether or not either side can be obstructed in such a place. I’m counting on you.”

“—I will do the best I can.”

Saying so, Ayato also activated a blade type Lux.

Though Ser-Versta should be at least usable, it could not be helped since it did not give even the slightest response after all, when he tried to activate it in the waiting room. He had thought

that it somewhat acknowledged him in the previous fight, but it was naive for him to think so.

『"Now. It's soon the match start time! Which pair will break through this fifth round and proceed to the quarterfinal!"

After that short delay, from the voice-announcer of the broadcast who now became really excited, the school badge on their chest's announced the match start.

"Phoenix fifth round, eighth match, battle start!"

Song and Luo, as expected, parted left and right just as the match started. They both began to aim for Ayato.

"Bloom proudly — Dancing nine-^{Primrose}spirering-flower!"

Julis' fire support broke in, so as not let them do as they pleased, but Song warded off the dancing flames with only his bare hands. With his fists, unleashed at high speed, the primrose of flame scattered all too soon.

Though it was a feat possible simply because the fists were loaded with prana it also meant that they were concealing enough destructive power to negate Julis' technique.

"En garde!"

Song, who effortlessly broke through Julis' attack, instantly shortened the distance and threw a right fist.

Ayato blocked it, with the middle part of the sword, but a prominently heavy shock ran through him. His feet, which held out at the shock as if a huge iron ball bumped, trembled violently and Ayato strongly clenched his molars.

It was clear that this destructive power could not be accomplished with physical strength alone.

In addition. Song broke in, as if to bump into each other's body, and threw his right elbow into Ayato's abdomen.

"Guh...!"

Although Ayato somehow endured it, by concentrating his prana, the power was heavy enough that it almost made him collapse on a knee. All the air was forced from his lungs while his body stiffened for just an instant.

Song did not miss that chance. He turned around on the spot and aimed a backhand chop, so fast as if to tear the air itself, at Ayato's face.

Ayato just barely deflected it, as he promptly raised his arm, and he leapt back and took up a distance.

Although it was as expected. Close range combat was far more disadvantageous for him. If he was not to fight within his range, by taking advantage of the weapon's reach even a little, he would be hardly a match for his opponent.

"I see... It seems that the rumor is true." Song said.

Song slowly took a stance. It was a unique form where he dropped his waist and greatly extended out his left foot forward. It was what could only be a stance of kempo^[2], but since Ayato did not recognize the form, and was unfamiliar with Chinese martial arts, he wasn't able to anticipate the schools particular style.

『"Oops, It's a surprising development from which the player Amagiri is one-sidedly attacked! Certainly player Song's attacks are formidable, but does this mean that that rumor was true?"

『"There wasn't his usual performance when the match started. The kneading of the amount of prana is by far incomparable to that until now, too... It can only mean that there is no mistake about the rumor. Well, anyway..."

As Ayato adjusted his breathing, he shut out the surrounding noises and focused his mind. If he were to lose focus even a little, the match would be decided in an instant. Anyway, without taking his eyes off every single move of Song, he had to prepare for and cope with any movement.

—But, there.

"Sorry, Ayato! He was able to escape!"

Julis' sharp voice struck Ayato's earlobe.

"!"

Luo, who turned around from Ayato's left side, unleashed a thrust with the staff in his hand.

Ayato dodged it by a hairsbreadth, but Luo's staff changed its trajectory upward along the way and this time he was assailed by an overheard blow.

Although Ayato hung his sword and eluded it this time Song, who turned around from the opposite side like lightning, released a jump kick. As Ayato could not completely dodge it a pain, as if his flesh was scooped out, ran through his flank.

Moreover, Song landed on tiptoe on top of Luo's staff, which was held low enough, and Luo thrust it up, along with Song, with exact timing.

“Wha...!”

It was a perfect combination so far.

Song, who danced in the air, landed behind Ayato and, faster than he could turn around, a palm strike was driven into Ayato's back

“—!”

A shock far greater to that of earlier went through Ayato's body

His consciousness faded away for an instant but, as Ayato somehow endured it, he forcibly moved his feet halfway and took distance by rolling.

“Hmm. So you endure that blow now ... As one would expect.”

Song muttered in a voice oozing admiration, but he once again took a stance and even a tiny bit of opening was nowhere to be found in his movements.

While Luo also took position so as the both of them sandwiched Ayato, he gradually shortened the distance.

One might say that the situation was heading for the worst.

Even though he was overwhelmed in a one-to-one fight, in a two-to-one, it was no longer possible for him to do something.

—However.

“Come out — Red Wall of Shearing^{Loropetalum} Flame Petals!”

At the same time with the voice of the dignified Julis, a huge fire wall, which suddenly blew up from the ground, bisected the stage from one end to another. Its height would be around ten meters. It was not something that even a Starpulse Generation could jump over without any scaffolding.

“This is...”

Song also looked up at the wall of flame with a surprised face, but he seemed to have immediately noticed the intent behind it.

“I see, so she separated me and Luo.”

Right.

There was only Ayato and Song on this side of the wall of flame

.

In other words, Julis and Luo were left on the other side of the wall, but the strength of the flame was tremendous, and one could hardly see through it.

『"Oooh? Is this a skill of player Riessfeld, the wall of flame, which suddenly appeared greatly divides the stage! ...Oh, spectators of the audience, please use the large screen. We have divided the screen and projected the image from a different angle in there!"

"For the time being, with this it's a one-on-one."

As Ayato stood up while saying so, he wiped his mouth. Though blood was slightly on it, he could not afford to worry about it.

"Hou... Do you mean to say that you have a chance to win if it's a one-on-one?"

Song slowly adopted a stance again while staring at Ayato with a look of hawk.

"Honestly, I think it will be tough, but I cannot afford to give up, can I?"

Ayato also set up his sword forward (at the opponent's eyes) and measured the distance.

Since Julis had done it, next up was his turn. He must somehow clear the conditions necessary for the next move. And while Ayato was still able to endure within.

“Fufufu, well you’re right. I ask something silly. I apologize for that.”

Only for an instant on Song’s face, a faint smile floated — and disappeared at once.

“What’s wrong, is it only this level? If so, it’s not much as the rumor says, <Petalblaze ^{Gruene Rose} Witch>!”

“Argh...!”

While somehow enduring Luo’s fierce attacks, Julis unintentionally bit her lips.

First, she forcibly created a one-on-one situation. It was successful. Since this was a prerequisite in Julis’ plan, one could say it went so far according to plan.

Julis’ miscalculation here was that Luo’s ability far exceeded her expectations.

She by no means underestimated him, but she once again realized the thickness of World Dragon Seventh Institute’s layer.

[Do you tell me he's the rank #23 with this strength? He's strong enough to enter the Top Twelve in Seidoukan...] Julis was inwardly tut-tutting.

Julis defended against his staff, which he rapidly and continuously unleashed, with her thin sword, and launched a solid attack from behind and above with the ^{Livingstone Daisy} Flaming Crimson Décapitator unfolded. However, Luo skillfully handled his long staff and did not let any of the chakrams get close while maintaining an advantageous range.

“—No. Wrong. So you use a part of your power to maintain this fire wall.”

As Luo once took distance, he turned a fleeting gaze towards Julis' back and muttered so.

“To maintain this much firepower on such a scale, the prana consumption should be no joke. As a result, you can just use only the remaining part of your prana for the battle.”

—To make matters worse, he was really sharp, too.

“Well, I wonder about that.”

Julis also returned the chakrams once again and adjusted their lineup.

In fact, originally the ^{Livingstone Daisy} Flaming Crimson Décapitator could bring about dozens of chakrams, but now on the convenience of prana and concentration, six was her limit.

Including this Phoenix, Luo and Song had experienced the Festa three times. Looking only at their combat experience, one could say that it differed from Ayato's and Julis'. Nevertheless, to think that she was easily seen through.

"Supposing that it is so, this can hardly be called a good plan. Even without going to such length, there were other ways to bring a one-on-one, weren't there?"

That was also correct.

If it was simply just to make a one-on-one battle form, then there were number of different means.

However, it would just delay the time of their defeat after all. There were no paths which led to victory.

"It can't be helped. There was only this way in order for us to win."

"...Hou. So that means that you still have a card to play."

Luo chuckled while spinning his staff.

"I can't wait to see it, but — if it's the case, do it quickly. Otherwise, the battle will be settled on the other side of the wall, you know?"

"Did you mean to say that my partner will lose?"

“<Murakumo> in his current state is no match for us. You also understood that, right?”

Luo just replied as if it was a matter of course.

“...Yeah, that’s right. The current Ayato, in order to win against you, would not have much choice but to skillfully launch a surprise attack.”

“A surprise attack, huh... Well, both Song and I are not so kind as to give you an opportunity to do it.”

As if to say “with this, the chitchat is over”, Luo re-set his staff.

“...”

While also slightly retreating, Julis reset the chakrams to a defensive formation little by little.

While at the same time exploring the sign on the other side of the wall, she secretly checked the ground with a side glance.

(A little more to the right, huh...)

“—It’s there!”

Luo moved so as to use that opening.

He flipped the chakrams aside, opening the way, and jumped within Julis’ range in an instant.

“Damn—”

“It’s too late!”

A stab of a shrieking sound flicked off Julis’ thin sword, which she tried to defend with, and was driven in her chest.

“Gaah...!”

Although she protected her school badge, by reflexively twisting her body, she was thoroughly blown off her feet.

(I probably have many ribs broken with this... But with this timing!)

As Julis took the defensive and immediately fixed her posture, she canceled the Flaming Crimson Decapitator (Livingstone Daisy) and focused her mind.

“As if I will let you!”

To Luo, who was about to give the coup-de-grace, Julis slightly laughed while bearing the pain.

Her opponent was originally good in long-range combat; and moreover, it was now a situation where she lost her weapon. That judgment was correct.

Right. Luo was right.

He was right, therefore — he went directly for his opponent’s weak point.

“Bloom proudly —
Six-Petal Burst Firebloom/^{Amaryllis Duo Flos} Twin Blooming Flowers!”

On Julis’ both hands, small fireballs were born one by one.

Even so, Luo was not daunted. He probably had the absolute confidence that he was more advantageous at this distance.

However, Julis had shot the fireball of the right hand not towards Luo, but right above.

“—Honestly, I am impressed.”

Contrary to his words, Song said with a slightly amazed look.

“To have endured my attacks so far even though you devote yourself to the defense, it’s really something. Moreover, your reaction is clearly getting better. No wonder you see through my breathing, range and the timing of my attacks. I can say that it is the proof of your excellent response ability. But — it’s regrettable, your body can’t keep up with it.”

Ayato, who had the wall of flame, which immediately blazed behind him, focused his mind without taking his eyes off Song, even though he was breathing roughly.

Although he had somehow avoided a lethal blow, the damage accumulated was considerable. His uniform was torn here and there falling apart and he had countless bruises and lacerations.

Even so, the tip of the sword, which Ayato set up, was directed straight towards Song without shaking at all.

“If you were in your unsealed state, our position might have been reversed. No, I would probably not even have held out so far.”

“I don’t think it would have been the case though.”

Ayato honestly responded to it while adjusting his breathing.

In fact, Song was strong. Since he won and advanced until the fifth round of the Phoenix it was natural. What’s more he succeeded, not merely with the type of strength which relied on a weapon or ability, but with his own strength which was the result of pure and thorough training of his body.

That said, even so he could not afford to give up yet. At least, for Ayato — for Ayato and Julis, there was still a card to play. For that purpose, he must somehow clear the conditions.

As Ayato took a quick glance at his feet, the asterisk that Julis carved some time ago was there.

—The rest was just the timing.

“But bullying you any further would be unbearable even for me . As an expression of my respect for you, I will end it with the next move. ”

At that instant, with a large sudden increase, prana concentrated on Song’s fist .

The skilled fist warrior of World Dragon used a technique to explosively raise an offensive ability similar to meteor arts by gathering prana in one point. Perhaps that was it.

“However much you try to defend. This fist will pulverize any weapon or arm which tries to block it. Well, it’s not at the level of your Ogre Lux, but you better dodge it rather than trying to block. Of course, if you can, that is!”

At the same time he finished to speak, Song stepped into Ayato’s range in a breath.

Terrified legs shook the earth as his body also quaked thinking of palm strikes similar to gouging.

He was too well cornered to evade it. However, as Song said, with the prana of the current Ayato, defending against it would be impossible. One could easily understand that by seeing the amount of prana Song gathered in that fist.

Just before the palm stroke reached Ayato’s chest... The two of them noticed a small explosion overhead.

[Fireworks—!]

It was the signal which Ayato and Julis had decided for.

—At that moment.

Ayato released his full power only for an instant, dodged the palm stroke and jumped towards the wall of flame soaring behind him.

“Wha...!?”

Though the voice of Song, who was at lost for words, was heard from behind, Ayato’s consciousness was no longer there.



Just before Ayato's figure was swallowed in the flames, the wall of flame split in two just like that of Moses written in the Old Testament. And just like from the front, Julis' figure jumped from the other side of the wall towards this side.

As Ayato and Julis exchanged only a glance like passing travelers, they switched each other's target, in an instant despite being scorched by the flame.

"Wha...!?"

"No way!?"

Song and Luo opened their eyes wide in great surprise and hurriedly tried to take a stance, but it was already late.

It was only natural since Luo was now facing Julis mainly involved with long-range attacks and Song was now facing Ayato, who could only perform close range combat.

The two people were completely taken by surprise.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style First Sword Fighting Skill — < Twin Water Dragons>!" The edge of Ayato's sword cut and tore Luo's school badge. And. During the same exact moment...

"Burst and fly!" The dual fireballs emitted from Julis' left right hands smashed Song's school badge.

"End of the battle! Winner, Amagiri Ayato & Julis-Alexia Van Riessfeld!"

As the mechanical voice declared the conclusion, the wall of flame vanished, and both Ayato and Julis greatly exhaled and sank down to the ground.

Not only Song and Luo, but also the audience was taken aback. Though the dumbfounded atmosphere and silence smothered the stage for a while with, which began before long, only sparse applauses, quickly turned into great cheers, which erupted from the stands, like a tsunami.

“Phew... we won, for the time being, but...”

“It was really close.”

As they canceled the winner interview after the game this time, too, Julis and Ayato were heading to the waiting room along the passage.

Although the winner interview was not an obligation their image, in the area of press relations, would worsen if they canceled too many. There would also be cases where the good publicity, natural to the Festa, would suffer without them. Today, though, both Ayato and Julis had no room to be able to answer.

Although they won, as Julis said, it was a really close match. If their timing was off, by even a little, it would probably be themselves who would have been defeated.

“Well, still it’s great to have gotten over today. After all, we will rest all day long tomorrow which is the adjustment day. And you will be able to go all out in the next match, right?”

“Yeah, on that point, it’ll be all right... But, what about you, Julis? Um, about the degree of injury...”

“What, this much is no big deal. There may be some cracks, but it does not seem to be broken.”

Julis smiled wryly while lightly rubbing the area of her chest.

She seemed to have been directly struck by Luo’s staff in their recent match, but at least it should not be accompanied with any illness.

Even so, Julis continued to speak as if it was nothing.

“More importantly. There is the next match. Even if you are able to use all your might they will likely be quite troublesome opponents.”

“Oh, if I’m not mistaken, our next opponents are—”

Ayato suddenly stopped walking there. This was because someone was standing ahead in the passage, in front of the waiting room.

A moment later, Julis also noticed him and opened her eyes wide as she was surprised.

“Hou, those are unexpected visitors. I don’t think you have come to congratulate us, but what kind of business do you have with us?”

The two people, who were standing in front of the waiting room — Song and Luo, responded to these words with a serious look.

“We have indeed come for that, but can’t we?”

“...It was our complete defeat today. It was admirable.”

At these words, Ayato and Julis unintentionally looked at each other.

“Huh...? N-No, That’s... Thank you.”

“Y-Yeah...”

As they were perplexed and did not know how to respond to it since they did not think that they really came to congratulate them, Song held out a hand towards Julis.

“It was you, who thought of that strategy, right
Gruene Rose
Petalblaze Witch? Be its conception or good timing, it was a splendid combination that could not have been possible without mutual trust.”

Although she took his hand, Julis was still somehow perplexed.

“But — you should be careful. A strategy of that level would be useless against your next opponents.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

A dangerous light was lit in Julis’ pupils, but Song continued speaking without being agitated.

“You do not have to be so wary. I did not particularly come here to check you, this is pure advice. Take it exactly as it means.”

“Even if you say so, do you think that I will obediently believe you? In the first place, you have no obligation to do something like that. Much less since our next opponents are your comrades.”

Since Ayato’s and Julis’ match was the last of the fifth round, they already knew their next opponents. In the sixth round, the opponents of the quarterfinal would be once again a pair of World Dragon — and what’s more, both were in the Top Twelve of World Dragon.

“Belonging in the same academy does not necessarily mean that we are comrades. Or is Seidoukan that monolithic?”

“No, that’s... well, you’re right, but...”

Julis did not really know what to say and turned her face away.

Certainly, even within the same academy... No, it was precisely because it was within the same academy that there was trouble. That was probably the same even elsewhere. Only Garrardsworth

was distantly related to that kind of talk, but there was also no telling how their internal conditions were.

“What, the reason is simple. Well, let’s say that we do not just get along with your next opponents — both Li ShenYun and Li ShenHua. Even so, we do not intend to tell you their weakness—”

“We had a good impression towards you. At least, more than towards those twins. That’s why we wanted to send you a Yale^[8]. That’s all.”

Song, who said so, floated a wry smile and shrugged his shoulders.

It seemed like it was really his intention.

“I understand. Then, I will ask again... what do you mean by strategy would be useless?”

“It’s because that sphere of action is the place where those twins are the best. When it comes to deceit, cheating or taking their opponents by surprise, they possess a gifted ability. No matter what kind of plan you may elaborate, they will always see through you, and come to say it. Moreover, they will never allow tactics like what you showed this time.”

“Tactics like what we showed...?”

As Ayato frankly asked so again, Song turned honest eyes towards him.

“Your tactics are based on the fact that you regarded your opponents on an equal footing as yourselves. Naturally that is accompanied with risk but you guys accepted it. In other words, you may call it a part of bargaining in combat. That’s why we can accept to have lost against you... Well. I would be lying if I say that it is not frustrating.”

“But those guys are different. They don’t regard their opponents on an equal footing and always look down on them; They never jeopardize themselves without building absolutely advantageous conditions. They twist and crush their opponents as they please. They don’t respect their opponents, and don’t even give room for bargaining. That’s the Li sibling’s way of doing things. We just can’t come to like them.”

“You guys have probably also watched their matches, right?”

Speaking of the <Illusion Projection Genesis Arising> and < Illusion Projection Fog Dispersing> of World Dragon, they were one of the top favorites. Of course, their matches and data were also thoroughly disseminated.

Ayato also tried to reconsider. Recalling the records they studied he observed that their matches were all one-sided and often developed to where they tormented their opponents. It was indeed something that was not very pleasant to watch.

“I will be troubled if you overestimated us too much. If we can easily win, we might also choose such way of doing it. After all, there is no meaning if one doesn’t win in the Festa.”

To Julis' words, Luo lightly laughed.

"If so, then it just means that it was a poor judgment here on our part."

"Anyway. I did not say to not elaborate a plan. Be careful."

As if Song and Luo had said enough... They turned around and left.

"Hmm..."

While Julis saw off their retreating figure with a meek face, she released the lock of the waiting room with her school badge.

"—What do you think?"

As he asked so while entering the room ahead, Julis replied after a short pause.

"Well. I don't think they are lying."

"I agree with you."

As far as Ayato saw, those two people, they would entrap someone by doing any such roundabout thing; in the first place, even they were lying just that much, it would be almost meaningless.

"Phew..."

As Julis sat down on the sofa, she took a great deep breath.

“I will take their advice into account, but let’s leave the measures against the twins for tomorrow. Anyway, I’m tired today . I will head right back after resting a little.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

Ayato also sat down and leaned his exhausted body into the back of the chair.

Today’s matches were all over, but there were still many spectators remaining in the hall. Although there was no need to make a racket since the players could use the subway going directly to their academies, they wanted to rest their bodies a bit longer.

After all. There would be no more days of rest from the quarterfinal on to the final.

“...And then, Ayato.”

Then suddenly, Julis teasingly said while slightly laughing.

“Next up is finally the quarterfinals. In other words, if we win through three more times, we will become champions.”

“Three times... It seems a little tiresome.”

As he thought about it. They must overcome today’s kind of fight another three times... He became depressed.

“Fufufu. It’s fine, if you understand that, but. — Have you thought about something?”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“Obviously, it’s about your wish that we would win the championship.”

“Ah...”

Ayato inclined his head, thought a little — and eventually shook his head.

“Hmm. I did not specifically think of something.”

“I thought you would say that.”

Julis smiled wryly and said so, but she immediately looked straight at Ayato with a serious face.

“I’m thankful for you fighting for me and honestly. Um... I’m happy. But, I think it’s time that you should also look at your own wish.”

“Even if you say so...”

“For example — how about something regarding your big sister?”

Ayato was a little surprised at the words that Julis just said as he found they were somewhat difficult to say.

The talk with Irene the other day — the matter that the student council president knew Ayato's big sister — Julis had also heard. She was probably anxious about it.

“No, that's... naturally doesn't mean I don't care about it, but...
”

“But?”

“Since Nee-san has her own reasons for having left the house, I don't intend to forcibly look for her.”

Ayato remembered the day when he came in Seidokan Academy.

『*Then, why did you choose this academy?*”

Claudia's words kept ringing on his head.

At that time, Ayato replied *“in order to discover a goal to seek after.”*
”

But, — now that he found it, then what?

“That said, the fastest way to do something about your seal would be to find your sister, right?”

“Eh? Ah, yes... if it's Nee-san, she should be able to remove it, but...”

To the attitude of such Ayato, Julis' eyes quizzically tapered.

“Ayato. Are you by any chance—”

As Julis was about to say something, a knock sound suddenly reverberated at the door and a space window, which informed of visitors outside the door, popped-open.

『"—Halloo!"

『"H-Hello..."

Saya and Kirin were projected there.

Those two, who were fighting the fifth round in a different stage, safely advanced to the quarterfinal, too.

“You expressly came up here.”

『"I know that both of you are tired, but since it's a rare occasion, I wanted to congratulate early..."

Kirin-chan, hesitantly, with upturned eyes, said such an adorable thing. Even though it was also right after their match, he was thankful for that.

“Oh, then anyway, I will open now.”

As Ayato said so and stretched his finger to the space console, Kirin, who was flustered, interrupted.

『"Errr, before that, there is one more guest, who has come, but ... Is it okay to come in with her?"

“A visitor?”

To Ayato, who looked puzzled.

『"Yeah. A visitor for Riessfeld." Saya laughed a little mischievously.

“For me?”

Julis who was watching the exchanges and until then did not seem to be very interested frowned at these words with a wondering face.

Saya and Kirin nodded to one another in space window and took a step backward.

One girl appeared from behind them.

She was quite young... rather, very young. She was probably at least about the upper grades of elementary school. It was a girl, who looked simple and quite lovely, but — if there was a cause for concern — she was in a maid outfit for some reason.

Julis, who saw the child, stammered with a stunned look.

“F-Flora...?”

Chapter 3 - The Visitor

“So — did you come alone from Riezeltania?”

“Yes! My name is Flora. Everyone, nice to meet ya!”

Though she somewhat had an inadequate linguistic ability, the girl, who named herself Flora, deeply bowed to the extent of forming a right angle.

Flora came over from the orphanage in Riezeltania which Julis was trying to save.

“When I ask her, because she had trouble at the reception, she said that she was Riessfeld-senpai’s acquaintance...”

“...She was really standing out.”

Kirin and Saya, who brought Flora, briefly explained the details.

Certainly if such a small child wandered around in a maid outfit, it was natural that she would attract the public with that alone.

“Yes, you saved me. Thank you, Sasamiya-sama, Toudou-sama.”

Whether or not she understood, Flora vigorously nodded with a quite indifferent smile.



After they had all entered into the waiting room it was presently noticeable, as expected, that for a girl to be dressed in a maid outfit on a daily basis, that the sense of incongruity was great .

“Honestly, if you were to come, you should have at least let me know beforehand...”

Julis gave a troubled laugh while gently stroking Flora's head.

Her expression was very soft and gentle; With that alone, one could understand, how very important Flora was to Julis.

“It’s because in exchange of giving me a ticket for the Phoenix, His Majesty told me to keep it an absolute secret from you Princess .”

“Hah... I see that Big brother is still way too playful as usual. That outfit of yours was my brother’s idea, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. He said that, if I go like this, Princess will immediately understand.”

“Geez, that person...” Julis let out a big sigh while holding her temple.

It seemed like Julis’ big brother was quite a playful person.

“But but, since this has now become something like Flora’s every day wear, I am comfortable with it since I have gotten used to it.”

“Even if you said so, it’s not the royal palace here, so that outfit is...”

“Everyday wear?” Ayato asked since it was bothering him.

Julis answered instead. “Flora came to work as a maid in the royal palace. Well, she is still, an apprentice though.”

I see. He had thought there was a feeling that she was dressed strangely stylishly considering that it was just merely dressing up, so that was the reason.

“Oh, yeah! There was a message from His Majesty. It says ‘you should come back once in a while by the end of this year’.”

“Humph. That brother! He even pesters me from anywhere. Huh. Well... It’s fine. Even without him saying it... was thinking going back once anyway.”

Julis said so and lightly tapped Flora’s shoulder.

“Besides, I also have to pay a visit to everyone in the orphanage.”

“Yes! We will look forward to it!” Flora nodded with shining eyes.

It was most likely true that Julis was also loved by the other children in the same way as Flora.

“...However, I was surprised. I didn’t know that the reason why Riessfeld-senpai fights was for an orphanage.”

Kirin, who was watching, with a smile, the exchange between Flora and Julis, said as she was impressed.

“I-It’s not really something to brag about...!” Said Julis as Kirin directed an honest look of respect at her.

Julis abruptly turned her face away.

On course, with the flow of the talk, Julis also had no choice but to reveal her own circumstances to Saya and Kirin. She somehow seemed embarrassed.

However, Ayato was thinking that it would be good that Julis shorten the distance with others in this way.

“Oh yeah. Hey, Flora-chan.” As he suddenly thought and called out to her.

“Yes?” Flora tilted her head and looked at Ayato.

“How is Julis in her hometown?” Ayato asked.

“...What is it, out of the blue?” Julis glared with a questioning look to Ayato’s question,

“No, I am just simply curious. You know, Julis, you don’t speak that much about such things.”

“...Is that so?” In fact, Julis rarely talked about her hometown.

“Mmm, even if you ask me how she is... It’s not really different from her current self.”

After a little thought... Flora plainly answered. “When she is with me and the others... She is gentle and warm; When she is in the castle... She is brave and cool — That’s why I think she is the same as now.”

“He~e. I see.” Ayato was a little relieved after hearing it.

If so, then it would be mean that right here was the place where Julis can be herself.

“Oh, that’s right! Do you want to see the photos?”

“Photos?”

“Yes! There are many photos that I took in the orphanage in my portable terminal.”

Flora cheerfully took out a portable terminal from her pochette [\[9\]](#).

“No, it is already fine with what you say.” Julis countered.

“...Hohou~u. It’s interesting.”

“I-I am also a little curious.”

Julis did not seem that much enthusiastic but the others seemed to be different.

“Err, this one is the time of Christmas the year before last, this other one is the time when we did general cleaning with everyone and then this here is during Hannah’s birthday...”

Flora was unfolding space windows in sequence while saying so.

It varied from group photos at the time of big events to these, which were anything like everyday scenes. However. The only common point was that everyone was smiling. Be it the children photographed together with Julis or the Sister, every single one of them were really happily laughing.

“Wow... there are so many.”

“Sister says that she wants to keep as many as possible for memories. Under her influence, the children have also come to take photos whenever it was possible. That’s why there are many everyday photos.”

Julis, who floated a wry smile, explained to Kirin.

“...Hmm?”

Then, Saya noticed some photos and occasionally beckoned Flora.

“Flora, this?”

“Ah. It was where I was asked to wash my hair.” Flora said casually,

Ayato, who saw that photo, hurriedly diverted his look.

This was because Both Julis and Flora, who were washing their hair in a bathroom, were photographed there.

...Moreover. With only a bath towel.

“—!”

Julis, who raised a soundless scream, snatched the portable terminal from Flora’s hand and instantly closed all the space windows.

“D-D-D-D-D-Did you see it? You saw it? You have seen it, right?” Julis, who was glaring at him with a bright red face, demanded.

“N-No, I didn’t see, I didn’t see!” Ayato buzzingly shook his head and denied.

In fact, he did see something, but since he did not see properly, it was not that much a lie... It should be not.

“Flora, I have told you many times to erase that photo, right...!”

“Ugh, but, but, it’s a precious memory with you, Princess...”

Flora Klemm

リーゼルトニアの
孤児院で暮らす女の子

フローラ・クレム

FLORA KLEMM

「でもでも、
みんなのお役に
立ちたいです！」



Scolded by Julis, Flora dejectedly hanged her head.

“Ugh...”

As Julis did not strongly scold her, she kept to a somewhat troubled quiet..

“...Still, to send such a small child alone is somehow a problem.” Saya said so and patted Flora’s head. As she tried to change the topic.

Honestly. It felt strange since there were almost no difference between Saya and Flora regarding their height though her words sounded quite right. After all, for Flora, who was still just a child, it would be safer to require for her to be accompanied by someone.

Furthermore. This was Asterisk, although it was somewhat better than usual since duels were forbidden in the town during the Festa, it was an extremely abnormal city where injured tourists were not uncommon.

“Well, that...” Flora narrowed her voice slightly bashfully and then looked downward.

Julis, who saw it, followed in a slightly slapdash tone.

“My brother, as well as me in olden days, didn’t have enough money that we could spend it freely. Even so, submissiveness to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation is accommodating in itself. If

it's only up to the Festa ticket, he can somehow manage with his connections. But, it's probably impossible until the travel expenses and hotel expenses. Sister might have worked it out."

"...Yes. It seems that she took out money from the savings that she steadily collected. But one person's portion was the limit after all (it was just enough for one person)... Then, she said that if she had to choose someone to go, I would be the most suitable."

As she was visibly downhearted and depressed, Flora raised her face and said enthusiastically.

"But. I am all right even if I am alone! I may look like this, but like Princess I am a Starpulse Generation, and I also intend to come to this Asterisk as a student someday. And then like Princess, I will help everyone in the orphanage!"

"He~e. That's admirable."

Although they knew at first glance that Flora was a Starpulse Generation, it was impressive that she already ascertained her objective from this age. It was surely from such a reason that she was judged the most suitable to be sent.

Ayato was honestly impressed, but Julis shook her head with a difficult face.

"You are still saying that... I have already told you that don't need to do such a thing."

"But, but, even Flora wants to be helpful to everyone!"

“You are still a child. Don’t worry about such a thing and more—
—”

“I heard that the student council president of World Dragon is even younger than me! If it's the case, then even I...!”

It seemed that contrary to appearance, Flora had a really stubborn personality.

“...You went so far as to mention a particular rank #1 as a reference, eh.” As Julis put a hand on her waist with an amazed expression.

Julis just sighed as if it could not be helped.

“I understand. Then, let’s assume that you come to this Asterisk with the wish to want to help everybody in the orphanage. Which academy do you want to attend?”

“Err... it will be either Seidoukan like Princess or if possible, um , Queen Veil Girl’s Academy...”

Joining both hands together as if praying, Flora answered with the eyes of a dreaming girl.

Girls’ popularity was indeed immense in Queen Veil.

“I see. As expected, you don't need to come to Asterisk.”

“...Yes?”

“The enrollment in either Seidoukan or Queen Veil is from a middle school age. Or rather, World Dragon is the only academy which accepts students in the age range of elementary school...”

World Dragon Seventh Institute did not establish a minimum age for enrollment. Of course babies/infants were not possible but basically if one was at the age, when he could receive (assimilate) elementary education, enrollment was possible.

From the perspective of basic long term training from childhood, it seemed that this was effective for the upbringing in Taijutsu or Star Senjutsu, which were World Dragon’s specialties. On the other hand, the other five academies were against it from the palpable moral principle that kids should not be put into a peculiar environment, like Asterisk, during the elementary course period. It was a vulnerable time which had great influence on an individual's personality and character development.

“In any case, it will take at least two years or so for you to reach the entrance age. At that time. I will have already achieved all your wishes.” Julis asserted.

“__”

Flora looked up startled.

“I remember having told you so the last time we met. I will help you guys without fail, and change that country. For that purpose, I will reign in all the Festa... Or don’t you trust me that much?”

“Th-That's not true!”

“Yea, then, it's fine.”

Julis contentedly nodded while she gently stroked Flora's head.

“As expected of Riessfeld. Even her goal is very great.”

Saya said as she was heartily impressed.

“—But. That's expecting too much. At least... We will win this Phoenix. Right. Kirin?”

“Huh!? Ah, err... um, y-yes...!”

Kirin, who was suddenly brought up this topic, hurriedly looked at Saya and then Julis, nodded as soon as she made up her mind.

“I-I won't lose! Either! After all, on that wish, I can't give up!”

Flora, who was looking at such an exchange, brightened her eyes.

“Oh! So! Sasamiya-sama and Toudou-sama are the princess' rivals.”

“Rivals...?”

Julis, Saya and Kirin looked at each other for a moment with a complicated expression. However. They soon all looked at Ayato as if having made an arrangement beforehand.

"Eh? W-What...?"

The three fixed their stares at Ayato just like that and then reflexively backed off with none of them muttering anything.

"—Well, certainly."

"?"

Ayato had no idea of what that was, but it appeared to be the same even for Flora who, with a blank expression, seemed to be judging the other three girls and Ayato.

"...Ahhem." As Julis cleared her throat. "No. Let's set that aside."
"

She immediately changed the topic.

"Anyway, if we were to clash, it will be only possible in the final regardless... If we respectively win, until then, that is."

Since in the original placement drawing the Ayato/Julis and Saya/Kirin team's were in different blocks there was no way for them to fight other than the final match.

"Fufufu... No problem. We are invincible."

Saya tapped Kirin's shoulder and confidently stuck out her chest.

In contrast, Kirin wore an anxious expression; However that confidence, from Saya, was what actually supported Kirin so much in her achievements so far.

Until the fifth battle — What's more, even since they surprisingly reached the main battle (final stage), the Saya/Kirin pair had overwhelmed almost all their opponents without letting them have even a little hope. Of course the opponents were considerably gifted; Nonetheless it is alright to say that it was much preferable in comparison to the extreme fuel-consuming methods of Ayato and Julis.

Even in the quarterfinal Saya and Kirin were firmly regarded as advantageous in the gossip. Indeed, Even though they did not reach so far with easy victory, it was also the same for Ayato and Julis.

However. The next opponents who they would face in the semifinals—

“Hou~u. Sounds promising. So does that mean youve found a way to conquer the dolls of Allekant and it's also ready?”

To these words, Saya's expression slightly became tense.

Allekant's autonomous puppets, Ardi and Rimsi, had won through by displaying a greater overwhelming power than Saya and Kirin and were now the big favorite of the Phoenix. After all,

while giving “one minute freedom of attack” to their opponents every time like in the first round, it was probably understandable, since they were not even slightly wounded so far.

—And in the case that Saya and the puppets smoothly won and advanced to the next round, both pairs would clash with each other in the semi-final.

“Look forward to the performance... More importantly. I’m personally more worried about your match.”

“If I remember correctly. A Top Twelve of World Dragon is your next opponent. Right?”

Kirin also looked at Julis with a serious expression.

Since all of them also naturally checked the matches, of World Dragon’s twins, they should know that they were formidable enemies.

“Well. We will somehow manage on our side. The day after tomorrow... Ayato will also be able to go all out; Then, unlike today, the cards to play will increase very much. Anything can happen.”

However, contrary to these optimistic words of hers, Julis once more wore a brooding face.

As expected... She was probably worried about what Song and Luo said.

Though a subtle silence fell for no particular reason...

Flora broke it by saying. “Ah, it’s already such a late time! Well then everyone, Flora will leave with this. Since I will cheer for you with all my energy in the next match... Please do your best!”

She said that as she quickly stood up and bowed.

“Wait, wait, Flora. In which hotel are you staying? I will accompany you.”

Julis also stood up hailing Flora who was about to leave the waiting room.

“You need not, Flora will be all right alone. Besides, Princess is also tired from her match.”

“I don’t need your concern. Idiot. Ah, then Ayato, about tomorrow’s matter...”

Tomorrow's matter was probably the strategy meeting in preparation for the quarterfinal.

“Is it okay in the afternoon? It’s been a while since the last time the two of you met, so you must have plenty of things to speak about, right?”

“Good grief, to think that this time it would be you who would concern yourself with it. But, if it’s like that, then I shall gratefully accept your kindness. Either way, it’s clear that, you should rest your body. It also saved me from asking that we will meet in the afternoon.”

Thus, after deciding the next meeting's details, each of them went their way on the day.

"I'm back... Wait, he hadn't come back yet, that Yabuki?"

As he turned on the light, a pitch-dark quiet unoccupied room, welcomed Ayato.

Eishiro's desk, where documents and memos were piled up, was completely untouched and the newly changed bed sheet was the same way it's always been. As expected, there were no traces that he had returned yet.

Though it was too late to care about it now, because it was always like this since the beginning of the summer vacation, Ayato was a little concerned about what he was doing wherever he was. He once tried to ask him, but he only answered *"it's news coverage you know? News coverage."* and did not tell him any more.

"He might unexpectedly loaf around at the entertainment district... Or something like that."

He just happened to hear about that place, which was located in the redevelopment area, a few days ago, but it seemed it was known to the students who, somewhat, felt like 'playing around'.

“...But well, it saved me a little if he’s not here. It looked like it would be troublesome to ask Yabuki.”

As Ayato muttered, he took out his portable terminal and sat down on bed. He was thinking that he had to look for some place, which did not attract the public attention depending on the situation, but since Eishiro was absent, his room was probably the safest.

“For example — how about something regarding your big sister?”

He recalled Julis’s words today.

He did not intend to forcibly look for his big sister.

However, it was certain that he was worried about his big sister.

“Errr... Ah, it is this.”

As he called the number that he just accessed, what immediately projected in the space window was, 'that' person, — Priscilla Urzaiz’s face appeared.

『“Ah. Amagiri-san!”

“Good evening. Priscilla-san. I'm sorry for suddenly calling you.
”

As Priscilla was in the middle of cooking, she was in apron outfit, like the other day. Judging from the furniture, which was reflected behind her, it was normal that she would be in that room where Ayato and Julis were invited the other day.

『"No, do not worry about it! I was thinking that I have to express my gratitude to Amagiri-san, but you were in the middle of the Festa and I did not want to hamper you... Thank you very much at that time!"

"No, I really did nothing that you need to be thankful about."

In the first place, thanking someone against whom you lost was almost constitutionally strange.

However. Priscilla slowly shook her head.

『"Amagiri-san brought back Onee-chan. No matter how many words I say, it won't be enough to thank you... Ah. that's right! May I invite Amagiri-san to dinner again? This time more than before, it will be—"

『"Geez! It's already fine, so just pass it over!" came a familiar voice from the background.

『"Eh? Ah, w-wait Onee-cha...!"

Then, from outside the screen, Irene nudged Priscilla aside and entered.

『"Yo. Amagiri. I saw your match today. It was an extremely close game."

"Thanks to you."

『"Hahaha! Serves you right!"

Irene, who laughed on the other side of the screen as she teased him, returned a wry smile.

She had the same sharp expression as before, but he felt like her steepness somewhat loosened. This was surely Irene in her natural state.

『"So. You have something to ask and not to Priscilla but me, right? No, thats wrong too. It's not really me that you want to ask something from — but that bastard Dirk."

"... You found out. Eh."

As he honestly answered, since it was a bull's eye, Irene raised the corners of her mouth grinning.

『"It's normal that I would easily see through that much... Is what I would like to say, but, unfortunately I already heard it from that bastard Dirk. 'It' says "Since there will probably be communication from you seeking to contact me in the near future, you will both inform and notify me at that time.""

As expected of the <Tyrant>. Ayato's actions were also within his range of expectation.

In fact, even so, it did not change what he had to do.

"Then. Can I have you convey him this? That there is something I want to ask about Amagiri Haruka. So I want us to meet on one occasion."

『"...All right. This is also a part my job after all."Irene stated.

"I appreciate it. Thank you."

『"But. Be careful. I'm not the only one he holds on a leash. According to the rumors, it seems to be the same for the ^{Ereshkigal} Venomous Witch."』

『"The ^{Ereshkigal} Venomous Witch?"』 Ayato said.

If even the Strega, which indulged the name of the strongest in the current Asterisk, was under his control, then it was something, almost, not to be believed.

『"Besides — he also has the Black Cat Institute."

"Black Cat Institute...?"

『"I'm talking about the Espionage Organization of Le Wolfe. Those guys are seriously dangerous. They will do any dirty work without hesitation if ordered... Well. It looked like that bastard Dirk doesn't trust them so much though."

In other words, it was something like <Shadow Star> in Seidokan Academy.

"I understand. I will be extra careful."

『"You should. Of anything/everything in life."

As Irene said so, she suddenly glared at Ayato with a half-opened eye.

『"...Aside from that. Amagiri. How did you come to know Priscilla's number?"

"Eh? It was the other day, when I got invited to dinner, but...?"

She told him so he could contact her in case something were to happen but "*was that bad?*" he wondered.

『"Hmm..."

Irene was glaring at Ayato with a suspicious look, but she soon cleanly pointed her finger at him and said this.

『"I'll warn you just in case. If by any chance, you are to lay your hands on Priscilla, I won't forgive you."

『"H-Hey! Onee-chan!? What did you say so suddenly...!"

Priscilla, in a state of panic, conversely to earlier, pushed Irene aside and entered the screen.

『"S-Sorry, Amagiri-san! Onee-chan said something strange..."

“Ah, yes, I don’t really mind... Then, please give my regards to Irene-san.”

『"Oh, hey, Priscilla! I’m not done yet with...!"

Outside the screen, for some reason, Irene seemed to make a racket but the relationship between the sisters seemed to be as usual.

As he somewhat felt relieved, and was about to cut the communication, Priscilla suddenly stepped in.

『“Ah, Amagiri-san, sorry. Can you wait for a moment?”

“Eh...?”

Then, Pricilla also disappeared from the screen; what the sisters were talking about in a low voice was faintly audible.

It was Irene, who returned to the screen before long, looking slightly embarrassed.

『"Ah... Amagiri."

“Hmm? What’s the matter?”

『"No... Um, well, in a sense... I... I thought that I should thank you, too. But only in a sense."

“Thank me...?”

Irene diverted her look and scratched her head while muttering in a small voice.

『"Like I say... It's about that. The matter of Gravi-Sheath. I don't really want to admit it, and, thanks to you for having broken it. My earnings also got terribly worse but... Well. It's also a fact that it would have been really dangerous at that rate."

"Ah. What, it's just that, huh."

Come to think of it. Irene also had a very loyal personality^[10].

『"—You saved me. Thank you."

At the same time Irene said so, with her face still turned away, the space window blacked out.

After revealing a wry smile and staring at the dark screen for a while, Ayato put the portable terminal on the desk and lay on the bed.

"What is left is to see how the <Tyrant> will move..."

Judging from Irene's tone the other side (that of Dirk's) had expected that it would turn out this way. Ayato did not know what he was planning... However. He had no other measures to adopt.

Claudia also said that she would investigate. But... If the opponent was another academy, and what's more the student council president of Le Wolfe, it would be difficult to immediately take action.

"...Nee-san."

Ayato closed his eyes and remembered his sister's image.

The Haruka in Ayato's mind remained the same as in five years ago.

A time of five years was long. It would be enough time to change someone.

It was also the same for Ayato.

He was fairly stagnant but, even then, Ayato was finally able to take his first step here too.

However—

The door of the room suddenly opened. "I'm home! Haah. Finally back after a long time!"

Eishiro, who carried a lot of baggage, entered.

"Wow. Yabuki?"

"Oh, my bad, my bad. Were you sleeping Amagiri?"

“No, I was just lying down, so it’s all right, but... It’s been a really long time.”

As Ayato sat up from the bed he turned around to Eishiro who had already sat down on the floor.

“I was really busy with a pile of work. I somehow managed to finish part of it, but there is still a lot more left... *sigh*.”

“When you say work, is it about that newspaper club’s coverage or something?”

“Yes, it is. The time of Festa is a time of high earnings after all. Materials are scattered about all over the place, I have to lay in stock^[11] here as much as possible — wait, ah, oh yeah I saw today’s match. First of all, congratulations to have advanced in the quarterfinal.”

Eishiro said so with his thumb up.

“It felt like a victory on thin ice though.” Ayato remarked.

“Now, now. Even so, since you have won, it is all good.”

While loudly laughing Eishiro, reached into to the refrigerator, took out an ice tea and gulped it down in one go.

“Phew! So, your next opponents will be the twins of World Dragon, huh. Those kids are troublesome. You know? Well, anyway, their personalities are really bad.”

“Yabuki. Do you know about them?”

“Only within the meaning of known data. If looking at combat skills alone, Irene Urzaiz, who had Gravi-Sheath, would be above them. In fact, according to the “Poem’s Mead” and the “^{Odolelilu} Hex Pantheon Six Sided Temple” sites, neither of the twins individually have received that high of an evaluation.”

“...What is that?”

As Ayato asked again about the unfamiliar terms, Eishiro answered with a surprised look.

“There are famous fan sites about Asterisk... Or rather the Festa . You don’t know them?”

As Ayato shakes his head negatively Eishiro took out his portable terminal, with a face that said “it can’t be helped”, opened a couple of space windows to the site(s) and showed him.

“In Asterisk; Ranks are naturally set by every academy so it's only something internal within each academy. Right? Our rank #1 is... Well it’s you; So whos the strongest between you, our academy’s rank #1, and Garrardsworth’s rank #1? It’s something we won’t know until you guys have actually fought. However, since the guys of the world want to compare anything and everyone anyway, there are many people who created their own general ranking system, which included all the academies, and published it in net.”

“In other words... It's something like an informal rank for all the students in Asterisk?” Ayato guessed.

“Simply put... It's something like that. So, the “Odolelilu” and the “Hex Pantheon” are the largest (industry leader) companies.”

Now that he mentioned it... This was something plausible. Since a unified ranking did not exist, it meant that there was no standard at all in a situation, where the students of other academies would fight, like the Festa.

“The “Odolelilu” is managed by private persons; It's an old-timer, which has all along continued to update from the dawn of Asterisk. It is said that it has a fairly accurate ranking, and it is also a handicapping reference used by many scores of gambling den. The “Hex Pantheon” on the other hand, is a relatively new site , adopts the peculiar evaluation system in which anyone can participate; if you ask about what it is, it feels almost like a popularity contest.”

“He~e. Sounds interesting.”

“In fact, since it's informal after all, there are many people who say that it's not credible. The Princess should be one of those people. And, as I said it in an interview before, it looks like the president does not like it very much either.”

“Oh. That's just like Julis.”

Since she did not trust the academy's rank that much even it was only natural that it would be the same with an informal ranking.

As for Claudia... He wondered what kind of reason she had (not to trust it).

"Well, now that you understand that, there is no problem as much as I can see. Incidentally, the current rank #1 for either site is ^{Ereshkigal} Venomous Witch."

"As expected. Huh..."

So. Two consecutive Lindvolus weren't just for show.

"In the "Hex Pantheon", there is also a ranking which includes past players; It's quite interesting. Over there, the rank #1 has always been the Captain of the Star Hunter Guard."

"He is the first person to have won two consecutive times in the Lindvolus. Right? Which means that the results of Lindvolus are highly regarded after all... Aren't they?"

"Whatever one says, among the Festa, the Lindvolus is the most exciting after all. For your information, currently, you are ranked #19 at Poem's Mead (Odolelilu) and #30 at "Hex Pantheon". It was much higher before your fight against Irene Urzaiz."

In other words, it would mean that it dropped since they found out about the seal.

“Well, for a rookie who came out this year, I think that you fared very well indeed.”

“I don’t really understand but... I wonder if I should be happy.”

As he looked at it all, since his interest was a little piqued, the highest rank in Seidokan Academy was Claudia. However, since Kirin came to the top on the other hand in the "Hex Pantheon", it was probably just for reference after all.

“Well then. Let’s return to the topic at hand. That’s why the twins’ individual combat skills are not that much highly evaluated. Of course, it doesn’t mean that they are weak for they are Top Twelve of World Dragon, it’s only about comparing them with the same class of contestants from other academies.”

As Eishiro said so, after closing the various space windows, he smiled wryly.

“But... It means that it’s not decided only with the matches. Isn’t it? If those twins were to clash not with me, but rather with Irene Urzaiz, it would be a game of cleverness. Where no one would be able to tell who would win.”

“I saw the game data and, I notice that, they are certainly skilled in exploiting their opponent’s weaknesses.”

As soon as they found that the opponent had a weakness... Thoroughly aiming at it was the twins’ basic strategy. Naturally, that in itself could also be called a strategy, but it meant that the

measures for that purpose were strangely abundant that they were conspicuous.

“Those guys can really skillfully use the advantage of the Star Senjutsu after all. And it would be something really unbearable for the opponent.”

“The advantage of the Star Senjutsu?”

“That’s of course versatility. The support from defense to an attack and vice-versa, whatever it is^[12] ...Oh. I see. This will be the first time for you to confront a Taoshi. Huh.”

“Oh, I have faced up to World Dragon’s teams several times but most of them were fist Warriors, before all else, after all.”

He knew at least that the Taoshi referred to users of Star Senjutsu but he did not know well yet what kind of thing the Star Senjutsu was concretely.

“It can’t be helped, for our friendship’s sake, I guess I’ll lecture you a bit.”

Eishiro said so and once again opened up a space window.

What was projected suddenly there was the World Dragon Seventh Institute.

“Well, simply put, the Star Senjutsu is something widely used to systematize the ability of Strega or Dante. Normally, Strega’s or Dante’s abilities are something which appear in a form, that’s

specialized in something, but summarized as a technique 'it would enable anyone to be able to use it'. That is the closest definition."

"Anyone? ... Wait. Is such a thing possible?"

"To be exact... It's not really anyone. Even among the Starpulse Generation Strega or Dante amount only to a few percent. Right? But in reality, even though they possessed the caliber to link with mana, with the fact that either their power is too weak or the image can't be built, there seems to have been many who just can't manifest the ability. Or rather. The Starpulse Generations who *don't* have that quality are few. They just can't use it that way"

"Hmmm..."

"In theory, if one can link with mana, the change of the phenomenon is possible. So. By instilling as a technique a fixed form type which extended only that quality part and which combined tools such as talismans, motions and spells, enables the use of various abilities is what the Star Senjutsu is."

"It's certainly amazing, but... If it's such an amazing technique, why is it only in World Dragon that it is taught?"

To that justified question, Eishiro happily answered.

"Yes, yes, good question. Actually, it is said that, there are many users of Star Senjutsu as such but only few instructors to teach it. They say that, in order to learn the Star Senjutsu, it's particularly necessary to adjust the flow of prana. Although it seems that that adjustment can only be performed by the instructors."

“...Meaning it’s almost a monopolistic situation. Huh.”

“It is said that with the twelve people, to whom the first generation <Divine Revelations>, who conveyed this technique in World Dragon, directly taught, the seven people, to whom the second generation <Divine Revelations> taught, and even including the <Divine Revelations> themselves, there are only about 20 instructors. It seems that the drawing out was also great, but given that it has not been successful everywhere, the education would be very thorough.”

Eishiro looked at Ayato with a slightly serious face.

“The abilities standardized by Star Senjutsu also seem to be around several hundreds. Those of Strega and Dante use numerous prominent abilities but... They are missing that minute portion of stability (security) and as such countermeasures are easy in that case. But. Taoshi has no such a weakness. You’d better be careful.”

“I understand. Thank you. Yabuki.”

The matter with the <Tyrant> and his big sister, the quarterfinals of the day after tomorrow, and his seal.

Problems seemed to be piling up.

“Phew...”

As Ayato sighed... He looked up at the ceiling.

Even so. He had no choice but to settle them one-by-one after all

.

Chapter 4 - Hesitation

—A small field, in a gaping wide clearing, opened within the forest.

There. Two children, still of tender age, were fiercely competing with, respectively, their weapons in hand.

“E-Errr... Ah. Amagiri Bright Dragon Style First Sword Fighting Skill — <Twin Water Dragons>!”

The sword wielded by the boy with an innocent face, though slightly sluggish, drew a cross and swooped down on the girl, who set up a large gun.

“—Slow.” Stated the girl.

She easily dodged it and, with her gun aiming at the boy, shot while turning her small body around. The light-bullets released from the huge handgun type Lux grazed the flank of the boy, who twisted his body, and impacted on the ground quite far; the grasses fluttered about with a small bursting sound. Even though the power had been adjusted down for self-protection, there was no doubt that you would not be able to move for a while if you got hit by it head on.

The boy swung his wooden sword so as to check and re-measure the distance from the girl. Though taking distance to the opponent's projectile weapon was an inane plan, the girl also possessed enough close range combat skills not to be taken lightly. If at all possible, he had to confront her from within his own range.

However, all the while, incessantly firing her gun, the girl did not let him do so.

“Damn it!” The boy exclaimed frustrated.

Although he avoided them, and occasionally flipped some away with his wooden sword, the boy was desperately trying to maintain the distance — but as it soon became impossible to endure, he clicked his tongue and greatly leaped backward.

“...Chance.” The girl muttered.

She took aim on the moment of his landing.

However that, also, was within the boy’s anticipation.

“Ha!” Countered the boy at the same time he landed.

He then flipped the light-bullet, which swooped down on him, back toward the girl.

It was normally an impossible feat to do but if one were to know the exact type, frequency & intensity of that power which the light bullets were adjusted to, and the timing interval with which they came flying at, it was not impossible.

“!”

The girl avoided the light-bullet with a slight surprise, which she barely revealed on her normally expressionless face.

At that chance, the boy ran in a jagged lightning-like pattern (in a zigzag line) and again shortened the distance.

The girl rapidly squeezed the trigger, trying to ambush him, — but the light-bullets released could not hit the boy as they were all one step later than his every move.

The next moment, with a splendid overhead chop, the boy struck the girl's gun.

"It's my win. Saya-san." The young boy, — Amagiri Ayato, proudly claimed.

As so, the young girl, — Sasamiya Saya raised both her hands and surrendered.

"...I understand, this time, it's my loss."

With her expression still mostly unchanged, Saya said with a small sigh.

Nevertheless, probably because she was frustrated, her eyebrows were a little closer than usual.

"With this, I guess, it is 321 wins and 182 losses for me. Since I have been continually losing recently... It's like I've finally won."

Maybe because their houses were also next to each other, as far as he could remember, they played a lot together.

In the beginning, both of them were only playing children's games such as tag or hide-and-seek but shortly after Ayato began

studying at the dojo their games eventually became just like the actual fighting they now currently displayed. However. The initial start (off) of their training/practices came to look like a sham/mockery as they grew up and out of their kid games.

Basically, the term ‘childish contest’ might be strong, but it was a precious occasion (place?) for Ayato, who was prohibited to actually train at the dojo even though he studied there, and on the other hand it was also the unique opportunity for Saya to use the guns made by her father to her heart’s content.

And one more thing.

“...Well. Yes.”

As Saya took out a piece of paper from her pocket, she handed it to Ayato.

There, it was written “wish ticket” in childlike clumsy characters.

“Ehehe. Thanks.”

When Ayato received it, he happily held it up to the sunlight.

This was a ticket valid only between Ayato and Saya, something like a so-called “help ticket”^[13]. Its intent was “to listen to any wish asked by the other party”, and this was what Ayato and Saya wagered whenever there was some sort of contest between them. By the way, the one that brought it up, was Saya saying that it was an idea she got inspired by the Festa.

However As for “anything”, there were many prohibited matters to be exact.

One was that you should not ask something that the other party really hated.

Another was that you must not request to remove one’s tickets or previous wishes.

In fact, speaking of how to use it, as you could ask the other to yield his snacks, or had him do your homework in your stead, it was mostly for lovely things as such though.

It was also a fact that recently the range of how to use it became wider.

The example was—

“By the way. Saya-san.”

“Hmm?”

“That ‘wish’... You don't intend to cancel it...?”

You couldn't act as if the other party’s request was nonexistent, but the side that used the ticket for the request (that’s, the other party) could cancel it. If possible, Ayato wanted her to do so, but...

“I don’t.” Was Saya’s relentless answer.

“But, I mean, shouting the name of a technique while executing the attack is rather embarrassing, after all...”

“That's not true. It's really cool... So rest assured.” Saya said so as she raised her thumb.

“Hmm. I wonder about that.”

“Even on TV heroes are all doing it. There's no problem.”

“Well, that might be so, but...”

“It's all right. You'll soon get used to it.”

He could not help but think that the topic was sidestepped.

That said, since he did not really hate it that much, Ayato also did not say any more.

“More importantly Ayato, did you have some kind of wish?”

Since there was not really an expiration date for the ticket, there was no need to use it right away. He could even save up as many pieces as he wanted, and could also use multiple pieces at the same time.

However, this time Ayato had already decided for what he wanted to request.

“Ah, that's right. Then, I shall use it at once.”

As Ayato said so, he immediately held out the ticket that was just handed towards Saya.

“—I want to get one point^[14] from Onee-chan no matter what. Saya-san... Would you help me?”

“Hmm...”

As Ayato woke up, from the ring tone coming out of his portable terminal, it was already past 10:00 A.M.

Usually, even when he had nothing to do, he woke up in time for early morning training but, as expected, it seemed fatigue had recently accumulated.

“At any rate... Why did I have such an old dream again?” He muttered while scratching his droggy head.

He also happened to have a dream of his childhood before but this traced back further than that — it was an old dream from nearly ten years ago.

“Oops, more importantly...” As he picked up the portable terminal, which kept ringing.

It was from Julis.

He glanced to the opposite side of the room Eishiro, who was sprawling supinely on the bed still wandering within his dreams.

Ayato adjusted the volume and opened the window space since it would be bad to wake him up. Julis, who was projected, said somewhat apologetically.

『"What. Are you perhaps still sleeping? If so... I apologize for having woken you up."

"Ah, it's fine, it's fine. I overslept, a little, so don't worry about it. More importantly. What's the matter?"

Since the strategy meeting for the quarterfinal was in the afternoon, there was still some time to spare.

『"Yeah. The truth is... Flora was saying that she wants to call you down for lunch. Apparently, she absolutely wants to ask you something."

"Flora-chan?"

『"Of course. It's if you are all right with it..."

"No. I don't really mind."

He wondered what on earth she wanted to ask him.

『"I see. Then, though bad, can we meet at the commercial area? However, the congestion around the main street is terrible. Well, another place would be good, but... unfortunately, I am still ignorant of the neighborhood."

"Oh. — I see."

Certainly since the neighborhood was usually crowded with people, with the Festa now in session, it was easy to imagine that it would become even more crowded.

“Even if you say that, I’m not also that much familiar with it...”

Since his after school and days off were spent on training with Julis and the others anyway, he had hardly gone out to play in the town even though it was already two months since he came to Asterisk. Although after the Phoenix started, the chances to do so increased as such, he was basically just going back and forth between the dome and the school.

—Then.

“*yawn*... what, are you looking for a shop?”

Eishiro, who was squirmingly getting up from the bed, spoke while rubbing the area around his eyes.

“Ah, yes. Something like that. Since it would be crowded anywhere at this time, we were talking about what we should do.”

“Hmm... Then. Let me recommend you this. It’s a date with the princess... Isn’t it?”

『“D-Date!? I- I- I- I- Idiot! Don’t misunderstand!”

Julis shouted over the window space as her face turned bright red but Eishiro, not minding it, picked up his portable terminal at his bedside.

“Look. It’s right here. Since it’s also pretty far away from the subway station, near the border with the outer edge residential district, there are also few tourists. It’s a little-known spot where the atmosphere and food aren't too bad. Maybe because of the nature of the place; The students of Queen Veil usually use it a lot, but since it’s now summer vacation, it wouldn't be very crowded.”

As he saw the information about the shop sent by Eishiro; The atmosphere certainly looked good. — What’s more... It was a so-called Café which looked like a good place to receive girls.

“He~e. As expected of Yabuki. You even know such a place.”

“Well. There is that. If it’s information, extensively handling it regardless of the field, it's the motto of our club after all.”

Eishiro, who said so, proudly laughed.

“So, what do you think, Julis? Shall we meet there?”

『“Y-Yeah... All right. I somehow don’t like it, since it’s a recommendation from Eishiro, but well it doesn't seem too bad.”

As he sent the data he received from Eishiro. Julis also seemed to find it not altogether bad.

“Okay, then, it’s decided.”

Eventually deciding to meet in this shop in two hours, Ayato cut the communication.

“Thank you. Yabuki. You really helped me.”

“Oh. it’s fine.”

Eishiro, still sitting on bed, turned a meaningful look towards Ayato.

“It would not hurt to keep making you owe me after all.”

“...I pray that it won’t be costly.”

Ayato replied to it with a wry smile and started preparations to go out.

“Hmm...?”

As he quickly prepared his outfit and left the dorm, on the way leading to the front gate, he caught sight of familiar faces, which were walking side by side.

As the other side also noticed Ayato, one of them — Kirin came running up in trot. Looking at her training wear dressed figure, she might have been in the middle of some kind of road work.

“Good morning, Ayato-senpai. Are you going out?”

Kirin bowed her head with a somewhat bashful expression.

“Yes, that’s right, but, here’s rather an unusual combination.”

“Oh. Really?”

The other person, — Claudia, ran up slightly behind Kirin. She put her hand on her cheek with a smile just like usual and slightly inclined her head to the side.

Apart from times like when everyone was together... He had no memory of having seen just those two together before.

“Since I just met Toudou-san over there I gave her a little advice .”

“Some advice?”

“Yes. — About Ogre Luxes.”

Claudia turned her gaze over to Kirin, as to confirm, and continued after a brief nod.

“It seems that, by Mr. Toudou Kouichirou’s intention, she was prevented to use an Ogre Lux before, but as you know, she is now a free woman. I was wondering whether she might give it a try if she wishes.”

“Oh...”

Indeed. Certainly, if Kirin were to use an Ogre Lux, one could easily imagine that she would become even much stronger than now. After all, she had reached the seat of rank #1 with just a Nihontou^[15]. Ayato felt the win was because he was able to use a non-standard maneuver, that worked to her disadvantage (

because he had used an irregular move), and to be frank, he had no confidence at all that he could win again.

“But...”

“Yes, I’m glad about the president’s proposal, but... I’m not really good at all with anything other than a Nihontou.”

Kirin shook her head apologetically.

“There is the fact that I’m attached to this Senbakiri and also that ‘Conjoined Cranes’ is a technique, which can only be executed with a Nihontou...”

“Oh. That’s also true. The type is particularly tight in the Toudou style, after all.”

Even if one possessed an Ogre Lux, no matter how powerful it was, there would be no meaning if the user was not able to skillfully master it. Just the fact of getting accustomed to using a weapon also implied that one had sufficient advantage.

“In this way, also, I somewhat have difficulty with Ser-Versta’s size.” Ayato admitted.

“Fufufu, it’s just me saying this, but I think that it’s because Ayato has not yet mastered Ser-Versta well.” Claudia said playfully.

“Eh?”

To Claudia’s words, Ayato unintentionally widened his eyes.

“Originally Ser-Versta never had a fixed size. When perfectly controlled it ought to naturally take the most suitable form and size for its master.”

“I-Is that so...”

Ayato cast his gaze to Ser-Versta which was sheathed in the holder of his waist.

It seemed like he had not yet been acknowledged by this rebellious child.

“Since Ayato seems to be not very good at finely controlling prana... The problem might be in there.”

“Hmm. I see...”

In fact, since it was one of the areas in which he was not very good, he did not make any excuse.

“Oh. We stray from the subject. About the matter of Toudou-san using an Ogre Lux, what would you do if there was a Nihontou-type Ogre Lux?”

“E-Eh. Is there such an Ogre Lux?” Kirin said. Surprised that it was even possible.

Claudia shook her head regretfully.

“No, at present, there’s none among those owned by Seidokan. The closest one would be Ser-Versta but...”

For reference there was no doubt that Ser-Versta was single-edged and its shape was close to that of a long sword.

Be that as it may.

“N-No. It’s already Ayato-Senpai’s and it’s not something that I can really handle...!”

Kirin hurriedly waved both her hands.

“Are there only just few Nihontou-type Ogre Luxes after all?”

“That’s right. In the first place, the ability and shape of an Ogre Lux significantly depends on the particular idiosyncrasies of the Ulm mana dite used as the core. Even if you want to make such an Ogre Lux it doesn’t mean that such a thing is possible.”

“It’s inconvenient.” Kirin frankly said.

Claudia smiled wryly as if troubled.

“Well, since they are so powerful, we can’t say that it’s luxurious. —but actually, recently, a new Ulm mana dite seems to have become at the disposal of the Research Institute of Galaxy in the Development Department.”

“Does it look like a Nihontou-type can be made?”

Claudia nodded to Ayato’s words.

“I have heard that it's possible. How it will actually be even I don't know, when or how it will be shaped as an Ogre Lux, but... Supposing the case that it happens so, I would by all means like you to try it out.”

“Y-Yes!”

Kirin bowed as she was thankful.

“But, you seem quite eager, Claudia.”

“It's my job to exert myself for you, the students that belong to Seidoukan, and have you leave behind better results in the Festa after all.”

“I guess student council presidents don't have it easy...”

Even though Claudia herself was a Page One in the rankings. Unless she had a very firm resolution, that she had to endeavor in order to make other students strong, she would not be able to keep on.

There, Ayato suddenly realized a certain thing.

“Speaking of which... Have Kirin-chan and Claudia happened to fight against each other?”

“Eh?”

“Ah?”

To Ayato's words, Kirin and Claudia looked at each other.

Come to think of it... Kirin was ex-rank #1 and Claudia is still the rank #2. It would be not be strange even if they had happened to cross swords at least once in the past.

"N-No, no, we haven't fought."

However, Kirin also hurriedly denied it.

"Well, Mr. Kouichirou had been wary of me after all. So, it couldn't be helped." Claudia admitted.

"...In the first place... President hasn't fought, in matches and duels over the past year, didn't she?"

"Yes. It's already been a while. I hope that I haven't become less capable."

As Kirin asked as to confirm... Claudia laughed merrily.

"Aside from duels, but even matches...?"

Come to think of it, he had a hunch that, Julis had also said such a thing before.

But, it meant that it had not been nominated even in the official ranking matches. According to the rules of Seidoukan, the nomination from a low rank could not be refused. Since Claudia was rank #2, almost any up-and-coming students should be able to nominate her.

And yet, she had not participated in matches for one year, which meant—

“Has Ayato-senpai ever watched the president’s match videos?”

“Eh? No, I haven’t, but...”

“Then, I think that, you’ll immediately understand the reason once you watch them. Just the fact that no one dares to challenge president shows how strong she is.”

Kirin said with a serious face.

“It’s not me that everyone is afraid of, but, rather this child.”

Claudia said so and stroked the Ogre Lux activation body hung on her waist.

The Ogre Lux Pan-Dora, which Claudia owned, possessed the exceptional ability of future foresight but only in exchange of a cruel price. Certainly those daring to challenge such an opponent, who could perform a complete prediction on their movements, would be few but the fact that there was none was somewhat abnormal.

“To tell the truth... I have also happened to assume a fight with president. But... I wasn’t able to come up with an image of victory.”

“Oh my, how humble!”

Claudia looked at Kirin with a wry smile.

“No. It’s truth. Besides... The president is ranked higher than me in the Poem’s Mead (Odolelilu).”

“That is a selfish evaluation by external people. You can’t take it as reference.” Claudia stated firmly.

As Yabuki was saying, it seemed that Claudia did not trust the unofficial ranking very much.

“But—”

“...Phew”

To Kirin, adamant to the bitter end, Claudia continued speaking after a small sigh.

“Then. — Was Toudou-san defeated by me in that assumption?
”

“T-That’s ...”

To Kirin, who stammered, Claudia continued further.

“Yes, there wasn’t any image of you losing, right? However much I can foresee the future, it has no meaning if I can’t deal with it. Toudou-san would, at the least, be far above me in the area of speed. There is no telling what would happen.”

In other words, from Claudia's estimation, it would mean that the two people's power, including their ability, were almost equal (on par with each other).

"...Oh. I'm sorry. It looks like we chat a little too much."

As Claudia clapped her hands, she bowed her head towards Ayato and Kirin.

"Well then... I shall excuse myself. Both of you please do your best in the quarter-finals tomorrow. I'm counting on you."

"Ah, yes, see you later."

While looking at the back of Claudia, who was leaving, Kirin muttered in a small voice.

"...What the president said is correct. There was also no image of me losing."

Within Kirin's pupils flowed her pride and conviction as a swordswomen.

"But, it can't help that, the image of the president was guessed from the data of the match. President has once lost as a team in the last Gryps, but even there, president herself had not demonstrated all her might. That's why... Nobody has ever seen president fight seriously."

"A serious Claudia, eh..."

Ayato remembered of when he was attacked by Claudia the other day. Since she was also in trance [\[16\]](#) back then, he could not call it “serious”.

“—Ah, which reminds me, wasn’t Ayato-senpai on his way to go out?”

“Ah. That’s right...!”

As he checked the time... It appeared that he no longer had the time to take it easy.

“Sorry. Kirin-chan. I have to go now.”

“Yes. Take care.”

Ayato waved his hand to Kirin and hastily headed towards the main gate.

“Phew... It was very delicious!”

Flora, who neatly ate up the omurice [\[17\]](#) said with a big smile.

“Ah, geez... look, you have ketchup there.”

“Mmgh...”

Julis, sitting next to her, wiped around Flora’s mouth.

It looked as if they were real sisters and was quite heartwarming.

The café, Eishiro introduced them to, was in the alley which went off from one side of the main street. With a black calm appearance it was a shop which seemed to pass by unnoticed if one was not careful — and yet once a person recognized it they would be so charmed by the shop's wonderful atmosphere.

The inside was brighter than expected, and a classic tone was flowing at a subtle level. As there weren't many seats, counting the table seats and counter seats, there were probably around twenty seats. Ayato, Julis and Flora were sitting at one of those table seats.

“But well, it sure is a store with good tastes and atmosphere. It’s vexing, but I must admit that Yabuki’s information is accurate”

“You should tell him so. He’ll be glad to hear it”

Both Ayato and Julis already finished their meal, and an after meal coffee was placed in front of the two people.

“That won’t happen. Since it’s not once or twice that I had suffered from troubles because of him. The offset balance is still far away.”

"Humph". Said Julis while she turned her head the other way.

Although improved recently, the basic thought process in regards to Julis’ human relations was a *“give and take”*. In other words; it meant that Eishiro’s debt was still big.

“So — what did you want to ask. While chuckling as such to Julis,

“Flora-chan?” Ayato urged Flora to talk about what she wanted to ask.

“Y-Yes! Please. Wait a minute...!”

As Flora explored her pochette, for a bit, she then took out a lovely notebook.

Flora was in maid figure today, too, but there were small articles of design, which suited her very well.

“There it is! Errr. You know...”

Flora’s hand, which was fluently turning over that notebook, suddenly stopped.

“Hmm?”

As she raised her glance, wondering, Flora’s eyes were turned towards the neighboring table.

“Thank you for waiting. Here is the specially made Fruit Parfait.”

A waiter, who tightly and stylishly wore his uniform, had put a huge Parfait in the neighboring table. It was decorated with multicolored fruits, indeed the kind of dessert which girls liked.

Even the girls appearing to be students of Queen Veil, who were sitting in the neighboring table, had raised a delightful shrill voice.

“What? Do you also want to eat that?”

“...Yes.”

To the amazed Julis... Flora nodded slightly embarrassed.

“Well. I don’t really mind.”

“Yay! Thank you very much!”

Julis raised her hand and called the waiter over and ordered a new Parfait.

Julis was gently gazing at Flora, who brightened her eyes to the Parfait which had been presented quickly, with a big smile.

As she noticed Ayato’s look... Julis turned around and glared at Ayato with sharp eyes.

“...What are you looking so hard at?”

“Ah, No—”

Ayato hesitated to speak for an instant, but since it was not really something for which to hide, he frankly continued.

“I was thinking that you’re unexpectedly good at handling children.”

“Is it surprising?”

“A little.”

Since he knew well that Julis had a rather severe character, not only towards others, but also towards herself, he honestly couldn't deny feeling a little uncomfortable.

“—Well. It can't be helped. It's rare for those children to be spoiled by people. It's impossible for the Sisters considering their position, and it's normal for children of Flora's age to take care of those younger than themselves. That's why I had decided, as much as it's possible for me, to spoil them as much as possible. After all, they are all like my cute little sisters.” Julis said.

Julis gently stroked Flora's head.

(An older sister spoiling her little sisters. Huh, come to think of it, Nee-san was also very gentle to me.)



As he suddenly remembered his big sister Ayato felt a sharp pain running through his chest.

It was also the same when he was with the Urzaiz sisters, but it seemed that for some reason, he was becoming strangely sentimental recently.

“Besides. This kind of sweetness is quite rare in the orphanage. So it isn’t bad once in a while. Is it?”

“Ah, but, but, the Sisters said that since princess recently began supporting us financially, it has become considerably better!” Flora said.

This time with cream stuck around her mouth.

“He~e. So you are sending money to them. Huh.”

“I-It’s not that really big a deal. It is the special reward of being a Page One. I have no other way to use it anyway.”

When one became a Page One, let alone the exemption of tuition, a certain monthly reward was provided by the academy. Ayato was also surprised, seeing that specification, but it was actually an excessive amount of money for a student. It was enough to make the ranking competition become fierce.

“Princess. Princess.”

This time Flora was pulling Julis’ sleeve.

"? What's the matter?"

"Please, say 'aah', Princess."

As Flora said so, and held out the spoon, Julis again smiled wryly and opened her mouth.

"Teehee!"

Flora moved there while contentedly laughing

"...Hmm. I see... Yes, this is, delicious."

"Yes! The tongue seems to melt away!"

That behavior seemed quite natural. Habitually sharing like this was probably normal for Julis and Flora.

Moreover, the size of this parfait was not a quantity that Flora could finish eating alone, it might be just right to share it at least between both of them.

As he was appreciating that scene, while thinking of such things , Flora suddenly turned to face Ayato.

"Oh, that's right! While we are it, you can also have it, Amagiri-sama!"

"Wha!?"

"Eh? Can I also have some?"

“Of course! Both Princess and Sister always said that delicious things, when sharing with everyone, would taste more delicious! Right. Princess?”

As Flora innocently said so, for some reason Julis’ face turned bright red and, she looked downward.

“N-No. Th-that might be so, b-but, that spoon, just now I...”

Apparently, Julis was mumbling-ly saying something in a low voice, but Flora bent herself forward over the table and held out the spoon towards Ayato.

“Then. Yes! Amagiri-sama, say also, ‘aah’.”

“...Aah”

As Ayato also smiled wryly and, reluctantly, opened his mouth, the fluffy sweet taste soon spread in his mouth.

“—Yes. It’s true. This is very delicious.”

“Yes!”

The acidity of the thick cream and fruit harmonized, with the right balance, so one could eat it as many as he liked. Because the quality of both the meal and desert were highly comparable one could understand why this place was really popular with girls.

“Thank you. Flora-chan.”

“Teehee!”

As Ayato gave his thanks Flora, seeming happy, was bashful.

“...”

On the other hand, Julis was staring at this with an indescribable and complex expression while her face was still reflecting bright red.

“U-Um, Julis, what’s the matter?”

“E-Eeih! It’s nothing! More importantly, Flora, what about what you wanted to ask? Finish up quickly with it!” Julis said as she urged her.

“Yes”

Flora, with the spoon in her mouth, started turning over again the earlier notebook.

Ayato thought that Flora had rather good manners for her age, because she worked in the palace, but there were occasions where one could catch a glimpse of her mischievous side. This was likely an element from Julis. Probably.

“Haah... Geez, finally the main topic, huh.” Julis said as she got too tired to wait.

She then reached out to her coffee.

“Um, which was it again first of all... Ah, this is it!”

Flora turned around to Ayato and falteringly read the notebook aloud.

“Well then. First question: Err... 'How far has the relationship between Amagiri-sama and Princess progressed?’”

“Bufu!?” Julis strongly choked on the coffee she was drinking.

Just after that she said.

“W- W- Wh- Wh-What is that question!!” Julis, who spontaneously stood up and shouted, but...

She immediately sat down again as the other customers' looks were concentrating on her. She then drew near Flora with a very low voice.

“...That question. It's not something you thought of... Right?”

“Yes. His Majesty said *“I wanted you to check these about the young boy... Who might become my future brother-in-law.”*”

“Geez. Big Brother...!”

Flames of anger burned, flaring up to Julis' pupils, as she reached for the notebook.

“Flora. Show me that for a moment. What kind of other questions are written there?”

“Ah. I can't! His Majesty asked me to keep it secret from Princess since she would get angry if she were to find out...!”

As she took the notebook back from Julis that she had taken, Flora bowed quickly in a bouncing way.

—Still. What on earth kind of person is Julis' older brother anyway? Ayato wondered.

“The secret, or whatever, has already been exposed!” Julis revealed.

“...Oops! T-That's right!”

As she just noticed now... Flora put her hand on her mouth with a surprised expression

“Anyway, I will seize this.”

“N-No! Since it's a work that I was assigned... Please let me do it properly until it's done!”

“No.”

—While Julis and Flora were clamoring like that.

“U-Um... Sorry to disturb you while you are in the middle of a conversation. Can I have your attention for a bit...?”

One girl timidly accosted Ayato and company.

“Oh, Sorry for being so noisy...”

Ayato was sure that it was an employee, who came to warn them, but looking properly, it seemed that this wasn't the case. It was clearly a student.

“U-Um... You’re Amagiri Ayato-san. Right?”

“Yes. Is something the matter...?”

“I’m sorry, but, would you come with me for a moment?”

“Eh...?”

As Ayato was perplexed at the sudden proposal, Julis and Flora had also halted their small dispute, and looked at the girl with a questioning gaze.

“Ah. S-sorry. It’s a bit late but my name is Kashimaru Corona. I act as the secretary for the student council president.”

As the girl, dressed in a uniform of Le Wolfe hastily bowed her head, persisted on in this manner.

“And um — the president is waiting.”

“President. You say...?”

Julis' expression stiffened, for a moment, and an insecure light dwelled in her eyes.

"What kind of business does the <Tyrant> have with my partner...?"

"Hiii..."

The girl named Corona, who was on the verge of tears at Julis' intensity, shrank back.

"Ah wait, Julis, I asked for this."

"What did you say? What do you mean?"

"Actually—"

Ayato gave a brief and general explanation, that is, he was the one who yesterday asked Irene so that he could meet with Dirk Eberwein.

"I didn't think that I would suddenly meet him today after asking just yesterday though."

"However... Is it all right? The <Tyrant> is the man, who ordered Irene to crush you, you know? Carelessly contacting him is..."

"Yeah, I know, and I'm more than aware of it."

"Hmm..."

Julis pondered for a while with a hard face, but before long, she turned a sharp gaze towards Corona.

"I understand. In that case... I will also go."

"Eh? B-But, president only asks for Amagiri-san though..."

"—Is there any problem?"

"Hiiii!"

To Julis' words, which were filled with intensity similar to blood lust, Corona further shrank back.

That said, regarding the matter with Irene, Since Ayato, who was the target, was more indignant than Julis, it might also be inevitable.

『I don't mind. You can bring her along Corona. It's also a rare chance for me to see the ^{Gruene Rose} Petalblaze Witch's mug.』

Then, a space window, which was in a state of blackout, was suddenly unfolded before Corona.

A low, overbearing and sharp voice. The owner of this voice, judging from his authoritative way of talking, was probably Dirk. He seemed to have somehow overheard the conversation of Ayato and company.

"Y-Yes. Understood."

As Corona, in a state of panic, bowed before the space window, she looked at Ayato's direction with nervous face.

"Th-Then, please here, I will lead the way..."

Judging from her face, which became completely stiff, it looked like Julis was very wary. It was absolutely unlike the students of Le Wolfe, and it was a little interesting.

"Flora, sorry, but it's like that. Can you go back to the hotel alone?"

"Yes! It's all right!"

Flora, who still tightly grasping the spoon, deeply nodded.

"Sorry, Flora-chan, I will make it up for you. So then..."

As Ayato said so and lightly waved his hand to Flora, they exited the shop in accordance with Corona's lead.

Corona advanced, at a somewhat quick pace, while occasionally looking back at them.

After a while they came out of the commercial area and emerged to the main street of the outer edge residential area.

A huge black car was parked in the corner. Although it was a so-called 'limousine' type the windows were greatly blackened so that one could not see inside from the outside.

"This way, please."

When Corona opened that car's door, the inside was more spacious and comfortable than expected. The seats did not line up like in an ordinary car; inside was a leather-covered sofa and a solid table with its appearance being just like a small reception room.

In the very back was sitting a young man with darkish red hair. He was of short stature, plump and something like a deep dark irritation was smoldering within scowling eyes.

“—Come in.” Said the young man's, — Dirk Eberwein's, voice.

Ayato and Julis looked at each other and stepped inside after a mutual small nod.

Of course, they were on their guard. They carefully looked around, but it seemed that there was no other presence than Dirk and Corona within the car.

When they sat down so as to face each other across the table, the car started to move, and Dirk slightly snorted.

“So you're <Murakumo>, huh... Humph. You have an absentminded mug. To think that 'this' is a rank #1. I guess that Seidoukan is not worth much, too.”

“...And who expressly gave the order to crush such an absentminded fellow, <Tyrant>?”

Julis retorted, turning a piercing gaze, but Dirk took it calmly and exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders.

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“You bastard, don’t play dumb! The other day, Irene Urzaiz surely said so! You bastard has—”

“Julis. It’s useless.”

Ayato calmed Julis. Who had half-rose to her feet.

“Irene told us only just because it was on that occasion. There is no evidence.”

“But...!”

“Besides, if you don’t calm down, you’ll get her in trouble.”

“——!”

Julis sat down with a thud while biting her lips in vexation.

Corona, who was frozen from fear, took a sigh of relief.

“Ho~ou, on the other hand, your head functions well. Huh.”

Dirk’s big eyes slowly tapered.

“It has nothing to do with what I want to ask after all.”

“Ah, that’s right. But, before we begin to talk, let me tell you something. I have no obligation to answer your question. Just keep that in mind.”

With a haughty attitude as it is, Dirk declared as he thrust his finger at Ayato.

“But, then, why are you here?”

“Well, let’s just say, it was on a whim.”

“For the very busy student council president to come all the way here just on a whim? Who would believe that?”



“...”

Ayato deeply exhaled and looked straight at Dirk's eyes.

“There are also some things you want from me. Isn't that right?” Ayato said.

“...That's right. If you want to get something, the deal doesn't hold unless you also put forth something.”

Dirk slowly crossed his legs again.

“All right. You pass. What do you want to ask?”

“All that you know concerning Nee-san — Amagiri Haruka.”

Ayato said, without diverting his gaze, staring directly at Dirk's eyes.

“Amagiri Haruka... Huh. unfortunately, it's not as if I know that much about her. I just happened to see her once.”

“Where?”

“—The <Eclipse Warrior Festival>”

“Wha-!”

To Dirk's curt answer... Julis widened her eyes in surprise.

“Do you know it Julis?”

As Ayato asked, since those words did not ring a bell to him, Julis nodded while slightly faltering.

“Well, yeah, I have only heard rumors about it. It’s said that it was an illegal, high stakes, game-battle without rules. That it was also made for the moral-trashes^[18], who weren't satisfied with the Festa and were in search of more radical stimulus.”

“Without rules...”

Shiver ran down his spine.

“There is no ‘give up’. The battle ends either when one of the players loses consciousness or... when he loses his life. Its scale, of course, was much smaller compared to the Festa, since it was kept underground, but as some of the rich people seemed to be enthusiastic fans so it seemed to be prosperous in its own way. But . That is—”

“Yes. The <Eclipse Warrior Festival> has already been destroyed and it disappeared long ago. After all... the Captain of the Star Hunter Guard hated its very sight.”

Dirk continued as he took over from Julis’ words.

“I have seen Amagiri Haruka there as one of the players. At that time... I was one of the guests of the <Eclipse Warrior Festival>.”

“His sister... participated in a match. You say?”

“Yeah. Since she was the user of Ser-Versta... I remember it well . There were not that many people bringing an Ogre Lux to the < Eclipse Warrior Festival>.”

“And then, the conclusion of that match...?”

Dirk plainly answered without changing his expression.

“It was Amagiri Haruka’s defeat.”

At that moment. A shock struck Ayato as if beating his head with all its might.

The world was shakily distorted; An uncertain emptiness, as if his feet collapsed, crept up from underfoot.

A strange sensation as if sucked into a bottomless hole

“Hey, Ayato, are you all right?”

“A-Ah. Yes...”

Julis slightly shook Ayato’s shoulder and he quickly came around to this senses.

“Well, it seems that, she had not died. I don’t know what happened afterwards. It was that only time I have seen Amagiri Haruka.”

“I-I see...”

It was the best that Ayato could answer.

“Then, now, it's my turn to ask questions.”

Dirk continued the conversation as he did not care at all about Ayato's agitation.

“What kind of relation do you have with Madiath Mesa?”

“Eh...?”

Ayato, without knowing for a moment what he was asked about, looked back at Dirk.

“By Madiath Mesa... do you refer to the Steering Committee chairman of the Festa??”

What kind of relations or whatever, let alone a conversation, they should never have met each other directly.

Come to think of it, Ayato felt like their eyes met for an instant during the opening ceremony, but...

“...Hmm. It looked like you aren't playing dumb. Well. It's fine.”

As Dirk said so, he snapped his fingers.

The car stopped slowly and the door opened after a short time.

“End of talk. Get out quickly.”

“—Wait.”

Julis said while annoyingly glaring at such Dirk.

“I had a question to ask you. How on earth did you know where we were?”

“Huh?”

“It was only several hours ago that we decided to go to that shop. Rather, if you had already made a reservation, how did you do it in this short period of time...?”

“Idiot. I have no obligation to answer you.”

Dirk's words plainly cut so.

“Damn...!”

As Julis thought that at that attitude, whatever she said would be useless, she quietly exited the car. Ayato also followed.

It was at the wharf close to Seidoukan Academy that the car stopped. It wouldn't take them much time if they went from here to the academy on foot.

“...”

However, Ayato, without even starting to walk, was looking at the blue sky spread across the lake as if feeling exhausted.

The car, which dropped them, ran away with the same unsociability as his owner.

“Ayato... Are you really all right?”

“...Oh. I’m all right.”

As he answered so to Julis’ worried voice, Ayato strongly clenched his fist.

“Phew...”

As the car began to move, Corona took a great breath of relief.

“Amagiri-san seemed like a rather kind person, but, Riessfeld-san was scary wasn’t she?”

As Dirk glanced, at Corona, he snorted, as if it was boring.

“As usual... You don’t have a discerning eye. When it comes to fighting, such type of people are much more troublesome than fellows such as the ^{Gruene Rose} Petalblaze Witch, who are easy to understand.”

“Huh. Is that how it is...?”

“But, well, it’s OK, it was worth the trouble to have expressly come all the way here.”

“Eh? But...”

At the conversation just now Dirk just one-sidedly provided information. Although Ayato also eventually answered Dirk’s question, it looked like there was almost nothing to get from it. One could hardly think that it was very balanced.

“There are various ways to use information. Though, depending on the situation, purposely providing information to the other party is also one way.”

“He~e...” Corona chimed.

Although she did not really understand what he meant.

“—Well this time, it’ll be excellent if it works even with the harassment degree.”

As Dirk leaned his back on the sofa, he said so as disgusted.

“Oh, come to think of it, I forgot to report, but when I went to pick up Amagiri-san and Riessfeld-san, there was a really cute girl with them. She looks like a doll...I wonder who that was.”

“What did you say?”

Dirk slightly frowned at those words.

“She wasn’t also recorded in the documents that I got from you, president... But, she was still small, and since she was not wearing a school badge, I think that she surely wasn’t a student of Asterisk.

Oh, yeah! Besides, she was in maid outfit, that child. It was a maid, you know? A maid! It was very cute and suited her.”

As Corona excitedly said that she laughed with a lax face.

“...That story. Tell me about it in details.”

“Eh? President, don’t tell me, you like maids?”

As she asked, again with a blank face, Dirk glared at Corona with eyes full of irritation after clicking his tongue.

“N-No, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! It’s a lie. It’s a joke!”

As she fleetingly waved both her hands Corona briefly talked about the situation when she went to meet Ayato and company.

Dirk, who heard it, pondered for some reason and muttered.

“Hmm, I see...”

Seeing something sharp and dark sparkling in his pupils... Corona felt something cold running down her back.

Chapter 5 – Elder Sister and Childhood Friend

“—As you can see from the contents of the matches so far, the Li siblings’ greatest weapon is, as expected, their variation of the Star Senjutsu. Above all, you may say that they are experts when concerning its illusory system. The elder brother Li ShenYun, as his nickname, the <Phantom Projection Genesis Arising>, implies, is specialized in technique displaying nonexistent things as existent. Additionally. Since the younger sister, Li ShenHua alias <Phantom Projection Fog Dispersing>, uses a technique displaying all things existent as nonexistent, there’s a huge contrast between the styles.”

“Yeah...”

Private training room of Seidoukan Academy.

Julis and Ayato, who came back to the academy, were carrying out a strategy meeting for tomorrow’s quarterfinal as planned.

In the space window that Julis opened was a match video of the Li siblings in the current Phoenix was projected.

“And precisely because they are twins, their synchronization is excellent. Let alone using words their perfect connection is established almost without even making eye contact. Really. There is nothing more troublesome than that. In addition to that, if what Song and Luo said is true, then we have to consider that they also excel at tactics— Hey, Ayato? Are you listening?” Julis abruptly stopped lecturing.

“Huh?”

Julis' voice seemed to startle Ayato as he raised his head suddenly.

“Ah, yeah, sorry.”

Julis continued what she was saying while glaring at such Ayato with half-opened eyes.

“Judging from pure Taijutsu only, Song and Luo are definitely above them. But, if judging synthetically as a tag, there is no doubt that those twins are far tougher. According to the standard strategy, the most effective strategy would be to bring down either one of them first, but their Star Senjutsu displayed a high effect mostly in the defense side. As counter-measures—”

“...”

Julis spoke up to there and looked over at Ayato to see what his reaction was.

But, although Ayato had a serious expression, his eyes were looking at neither the space window nor Julis.

Ayato was obviously thinking about something different which had nothing to do with what Julis was saying.

“...Hah.”

Julis steadily stared at Ayato's face and greatly sighed.

“Looks like you are really worried about your big sister after all.”

“! That’s...”

Ayato tried to say something, but stopped right away.

“I won’t say something like ‘I understand your feelings’ to console you. After all, I hardly know what kind of person your sister is, and what kind of relations there was between both of you. However, I think that I can tell how much you dearly love your sister.”

“Julis...”

“—But, shouldn’t you task all your energy to this Phoenix precisely for it?”

When she said so, Ayato frowned as he was somewhat perplexed.

“That is... To win and follow my wish for Nee-san’s search. Is what you mean?” Ayato said as if puzzled.

“Yes. Of course, for that purpose, we have to win the Phoenix and it won’t be an easy task. But, with the only clue we have now, you can’t possibly find her, right?”

From what he heard, Haruka’s data no longer existed in Seidokan Academy, and even the newly obtained information was only a witness story about the underground — a place where it was no longer possible to search, for the present time, at that.

“You had said that you weren’t going to forcibly look for your sister, but, are you still feeling the same now?”

“...”

Ayato did not answer and slightly cast his eyes down.

Julis saw it and once again took a deep sigh in her mind.

—*“It’s a little troublesome, but I must say it after all”* thought Julis.

“Ayato. You may get angry, if I’m wrong, but... You, aren’t you by any chance afraid?”

“...Afraid?” Ayato asked in return as if it was doubtful

After staring in silence, for a while at Ayato, Julis slowly opened her mouth.

“Your big sister applied that seal and disappeared without saying anything. Of course, it’s a fact that, you wished to be reunited with your sister. But, at the same time, you will naturally also want to know the reason why she did it. The more you are attached to your sister... The more afraid you will be to meet her.

Ayato suddenly raised his face.

“—Right. The fear that she might have abandoned you.” Said Julis plainly.

“...!”

At Julis' words... Ayato muttered as if he realized that for the first time.

"I see... Yeah, now that you say it, it might certainly be so." Ayato said, more to himself, as he reflected upon it.

To Ayato... Julis nodded.

"But, it might also be inevitable, to think about it in that way. Being rejected by someone that you hold dear is painful. Just by thinking of that possibility... It's natural that your heart will cower."

Julis, while saying so, felt a sharp pain running through her chest.

At that moment the face of a close friend, who she parted from, flashed across her mind.

Anything and everything had changed; Even the face of her dear friend.

However. Julis slightly shook her head and stopped her sentiments which tried to resurface.

"However, if you want to clarify the truth, it's an undeniable fact that, this opportunity would be your chance to do so. You should think about it properly."

"...You're right."

In the voice of Ayato, who said so and nodded, as expected, there was still no vigor.

“Okay. Then, we shall dismiss for today (that’s all for today).”

“Eh? But, what about the countermeasures for tomorrow—”

“No matter how I discuss with you in your actual state, I don’t think we will reach a useful conclusion. It’s just a waste of time.”

“Ugh... S-Sorry.”

It seemed that he was aware of it.

To Ayato, who frankly apologized, Julis returned a wry smile.

“It will be again at the very last-minute, but we will have no choice but to make time before tomorrow’s match. We will continue (the strategy meeting) then.”

“...Understood.”

Feebly nodding, Julis, who saw off Ayato, who left the training room, took out her portable terminal after a little hesitation.

It was frustrating, but this was all what she could do for him.

From this point on, she could only leave the rest to someone, who could do something.

As Julis entered that person’s number the space window opened after a while and a familiar face was projected.

“—It’s me. I’m sorry, for the sudden call, but... I want to ask you something.”

As Ayato returned to his room, Eishiro was nowhere to be found.

Since he said that he still had work left to do, he might be at it presently, or he simply went out to play.

In any case, it was just right since he wanted to be alone for a while. He turned off his portable terminal and lay down on the bed.

When he turned his line of sight, a very high summer sky of the present evening was spreading outside the window. After blankly looking at it for a while, Ayato took a deep breath so as to extrude the lees^[19] (mental sediment), which accumulated at the bottom of his body.

“...Afraid, huh.”

Ayato thought that Julis’ remark was probably correct.

He was not aware of it, but that anxiety was certainly lurking somewhere in his heart.

Of course, Ayato believed in his big sister. His big sister was a person: strong, straightforward, and above all full of affection and

kindness. No matter what were to happen, she would never abandon him. Right, he firmly and strongly believed it.

However.

At the same time, indelible questions were also nestling close to there.

Why did she apply a seal on him?

Why had she disappeared?

Why didn't she say anything?

Ayato had been keeping himself from worrying about many such questions by believing in his big sister.

No matter, how much he worried about it, he wouldn't get a quick answer anyway. If so, then just thinking about it would be useless.

He did not think that that choice was wrong but, in a certain sense, one might also say that he was just running away.

—And.

“Hmm...?”

As Ayato was brooding over his thoughts, he suddenly felt a strange presence outside the window.

It was not an enemy, but, it was like it (the presence) was searching something...

“...”

Ayato quietly opened the window while being cautious — he recalled that he also had a similar sensation before.

That was at one time when he walked with Kirin from the dorm

“...Bah!”

“Wow!” Ayato exclaimed in naked surprise.

What suddenly appeared, to be hanging from the sash upside down, as he might have expected, was Saya.

Even though he knew it a moment sooner he was still surprised because her behavior was eccentric as usual.

“...Saya, I have also said this before but, don’t scare me so much.”

“It’s because Ayato’s phone was not connecting.”

As Saya said so, she turned her body around in the air and landed within the room. Really just like a cat.

“Oh, it’s because I want to be alone for a while to think... Wait. Saya! More importantly... This is the men’s dorm!”

“Yeah. I know.”

Saya inclined her head to the side seeming to want to say “what about it?”.

Like the women’s dorm the entrance in the men’s dorm was, in principle prohibited, to the opposite sex, too.

Putting aside when one could meet the other party in the drawing room through the regular procedure as Kirin the other day, the fact that intrusion without permission was subject to punishment was not different regardless of the men's dorm or the women's dorm. And, like how there was a vigilance committee in the women’s dorm, an organization called patrol group which protected the public morals within the dorm, there was also one for the men’s dorm.

However, just one point was different, although in the women’s dorm the one intruding without permission was subject to punishment. In contrast, in the men’s dorm it was the one deemed to allow it — in other words, the boarder, who was punished. Usually any point raised on the men’s side was never even listened to.

“...There, Ayato, sit down.”

Whether or not she knew of his circumstances, Saya sat down on Ayato’s bed and invited him to sit next to her as she unreservedly tapped there with both hands.

“Haah...”

Since it seemed, like whatever he said would be useless, he had no choice but to do as she asked.

“So. What business do you have with me?”

Since, she had expressly come all the way here to the men’s dorm, it was probably something very important.

By the way recently, Saya was finally able to move within the campus without losing her way.

“...”

But Saya, did not answer at all and was, just fixedly staring in Ayato’s eyes.

“Wh-What's the matter?”

“...That’s my line.”

“Eh?”

Saya, still looking at Ayato in the eyes, told him with her usual — however, slightly blaming tone.

“...Ayato. Is there something troubling you?”

At these words Ayato unintentionally looked back at Saya.

“—I see. You have heard from Julis... Right?”

Saya nodded and continued her speech.

“I was contacted just a little while ago. Riessfeld is really worried about you, Ayato, otherwise she would not have told me.”

“Julis... Contacted you?”

It was indeed a little surprising.

Julis was not the kind of person who easily asked a favor from other people. Much less if the other party was Saya, all the more. Just that much proved how much she was worried about him.

“...Riessfeld is unexpectedly a good person. I have misunderstood her a little.”

As Saya understood that, she slightly hung her head in shame and, in an unusually deeply emotive tone, said.

“Aside from it—”

However she, immediately raised her face and, once again looked at Ayato in the eyes.

“—Ayato. Do you really think that Haru-nee would abandon you?”

“That’s...”

At the straightforward question... Ayato unintentionally stammered.

Even though he tried to spin words of denial it didn't come out easily.

Perhaps, by any chance, rather negative assumptions were inevitably stuck somewhere in his heart.

“Hmm”

Saya, who saw it, angrily frowned and slowly lifted both her hands.

And then.

“...Idiot.” A *slap* sound reverberated.

Saya clapped, with both her hands, so as to hold each of Ayato's cheeks.

Ayato opened his eyes wide in as much surprise as it was sudden.

While holding his tinglingly hot cheeks rather than painful, Saya said in a strong tone.

“I swear it. There is no way in hell that Haru-nee would abandon you! Ayato.”

“Saya...”

That might be an irresponsible encouragement with no basis from an outsider's perspective. Certainly Saya might know his big

sister well, but even so, it was only Ayato who saw his big sister that day — the day she disappeared.

However, for the current Ayato, just the fact that there was someone by his side that attested for Haru-nee was a great salvation.

“Besides, that Haru-nee really lost to someone, I personally don’t believe it. But, anyway, if it’s true... Then it might be not that Haru-nee didn’t contact you but rather that she could not.”

“!”

“If so, then you shouldn’t be wasting time to worry about it.”

Saya slowly said so as to persuade him.

“—Yeah, that’s right, it’s as you say. Saya.”

Ayato firmly nodded and looked back at Saya straight in the eyes.

In the end, if he did not act by fear of something, he would still not know anything. And at this rate he might someday end up regretting.

If so. Then he could only do what he had to do now.

“...All right. That’s more like my Ayato.”

As Saya said so, she gently smiled while stroking Ayato’s cheeks.

The wind, which came blowing from the window, gently shook Saya's blue hair.

At that expression, which he saw for the first time, Ayato felt a throbbing in his chest.

It was for just an instant but it was a vivid sensation that he had never felt up to now towards Saya.

“...Ayato?”

“A-Ah. No, it's nothing, it's nothing.”

Without also knowing well himself, Ayato shrank back while buzzingly waving his hand.

“?”

Saya, still wearing a strange expression, suddenly clapped her hands.

“Oh yeah. Speaking of Haru-nee — do you remember the bout, both you and I, had against her?”

“Of course. There's no way I would forget.”

He had just seen it in dream just the other day after all.



That was—

“Sorry, sorry, have I kept you waiting?”

Haruka, who appeared in her uniform, said to Ayato and Saya, who had finished preparing ahead.

“No, it’s all right, Nee-chan.”

“...No problem.”

In the usual field, before the evening.

Ayato set up his favorite wooden sword and Saya had already deployed her dual pistols type Lux.

“More importantly. Is a two-to-one bout really all right? Even if like this we get one point from Nee-chan ...”

“Yes, I understand geez. You want to follow the next lessons at the pupil’s home, right? I will put in a good word for you to Otou-san^[20] — if you really get one point from me, that is.”

Haruka, while saying so, also took her wooden sword and lightly swung it two, three times.

The usually carefree mood of Haruka suddenly changed completely as soon as she set it up. The air became tense to the extent that one could even feel suffocation.

Ayato and Saya gulpingly swallowed their saliva and fell one step back as they were overawed.

“Now then. I already finished my preparations, so let’s begin.”

At Haruka’s words Ayato and Saya, still remaining silent, exchanged a glance and nodded a little to one another. They had already ironed out their basic strategy.

After both sides bowed to each other, they first adopted the standard strategy of a many-to-one fight by splitting at both sides, and gradually moved towards a position so as to sandwich Haruka.

Haruka did not move as she took a side stance. Just her eyes were cautiously chasing the two’s movements, but that was just it.

Ayato had many times challenged Haruka in places, other than the Dojo, but even then the exchanges were rarely started by Haruka. As if to survey his present competence, at that point, she first let Ayato drive in to his heart’s content. Then seeing an opening and settling with a counter was Haruka’s way of moving things along.

And. Ayato had never taken one point from Haruka until now.

[However, since today is a two-on-one bout, it won't proceed like usual...!]

As Ayato muttered so in his mind he adjusted his breathing.

Haruka's stance was naturally impeccable — but even so they couldn't just stand back and watch.

“Teyaah!”

Ayato sliced with an overhead chop with a shout of shrieking sound.

At the same time, Saya, who took position in the opposite side across Haruka, acted as support by shooting coverage fire.

It was an attack with a perfect timing, but Haruka dodged the light balls with minimum movement and easily repelled Ayato's blow.

Even so, Ayato returned the edge of his sword and launched two, three strikes.

“Phew... I see that your swordsmanship is much better than before. This is the fruit of basic training.” Haruka remarked.

“But I had no choice because you made me do that!”

While easily defending against Ayato's attacks, unleashed in a rapid succession, Haruka calmly made brief comments. She seemed to still have enough room to spare. So as to give relief to

Ayato's attacks, Saya's gunning, which also aimed and finished, was easily dodged.

However. All was going so far according to the plan. Where he more or less received support, from the beginning, neither thought that Ayato's attacks alone would work on Haruka.

"Saya-chan!"

"...Leave it to me."

At the same time as Ayato's signal, Saya, who was taking distance until now, instantly shortened the interval.

"Oh?"

Although Saya's close range combat skill is high, as expected, it was not enough to face Haruka by herself. But, if it was both Saya and Ayato, then it was another story. Much less her gunning, at point-blank range, unlike earlier, would naturally become difficult to dodge.

While contrary, to until now, Ayato acted as Saya's support, he awaited a possible opening from Haruka by Saya's gunning — it was the strategy that Ayato and Saya set up.

"He~e... this is, quite good...!"

Haruka pulled through the two's fierce attack while saying as she was impressed, but she was gradually pushed by Saya and Ayato. Their fine combination, rather than following their previous preparation (strategy), was all improvisation. Even so, their

breathing matched perfectly, it was a perfect coordination so as not to give any chance for Haruka to exploit.

“Geez. I’m a little burnt...!”

—But, Just as Haruka muttered so, her movements radically changed.

The movement of the wooden sword that she had been using to ward off attacks so far, changed into that of a sharp and offensive one. As expected... She had judged that it would be tough with a defensive style.

[Well, from here on it's the real thing...!]

Ayato raised his concentration and prepared for Haruka’s attacks.

Haruka’s sword, which switched to offensive, was not of an ordinary sharpness. One false move and the match would be over in an instant. In fact, at the same time, this was also a good opportunity. This was because her defense would inevitably become lax if she inclined towards offensive.

[We somehow got over here—!]

The moment he re-motivated himself a lightning speed blow from Haruka flipped up Ayato’s wooden sword.

“Guh!”

Although, he just barely prevented it from being flicked off his hand, one could see his hand gripping the sword had become numb like from an electric shock.

In addition. Haruka's wooden sword drew an arc in the sky and knocked the pistol in Saya's right hand.

"...Ayato."

That instant. Saya's eyes intersected with Ayato's.

Ayato, who understood her intention, in an instant, re-gripped his wooden sword.

The next moment the pistol, still remaining in Saya's left hand, fired light balls.

—However, not at Haruka but, towards the ground.

"Eeh?"

Haruka's voice resounded beyond that of the cloud of dust, which whirled up, as she was surprised.

"Taaaaa!"

Ayato did not miss that chance and mowed down his wooden sword straight for Haruka.

There was no better timing than this; It was the best coordinated attack.

The attack, which Ayato just employed, was used because he was partly convinced of victory. However, before it was completed, it was stopped only by what he felt was an indescribable strong and heavy feeling.

“!?”

“Well, Just now, I guess you were a little impatient.”

On the other side of the cloud of dust, Haruka’s face slightly floated a wry smile.

The wooden sword in her hand defended against Ayato’s blow at the very limit.

“Argh...!”

Although amazed, Ayato and Saya promptly took a distance, and rebuilt their stance.

(So even that blow was not good ...!)

Although he strongly clenched his molars, because of the frustration, Haruka was staring at such Ayato in admiration.

“Phew... Ayato. Saya-chan. You’re amazing, honestly, I did not expect you would get this far.”

That compliment might be pleasant but Haruka’s next words blew it off.

“If I don’t seriously respond to this, too, it will be rude of me. Right?”

“A serious Nee-san?” “...”

Ayato hadn't ever once fought a serious Haruka so far. No, on the contrary, he had never even seen her fighting with all her might.

Haruka lowered her wooden sword and adjusted her breathing. She closed her eyes for a little while — and then opened them.

The air, which was tense, suddenly felt like it became tenser. A tension as if one was riding on a blade.

Nevertheless. Haruka’s prana was surprisingly quiet and transparent.

However... That was all.

Rather, just by lowering her wooden sword, it looked like she was more defenseless than just a little while ago. It was to the extent that one could say that she was full of openings.

“Saya-chan...”

Ayato winked at Saya who also returned a small nod.

She might be up to something but it was useless to think about it. They should try to attack from here.

Just like in the beginning, they took position so as to sandwich Haruka from the front and rear and, mutually, gradually, shorten the distance.

There was no second guessing. They instantly bet on victory or defeat.

“Huh!”

From the front. Ayato slashed his wooden sword diagonally from the shoulder.

At the same time from the rear. Saya fired with her pistol at close range.

—At that moment.

Haruka’s wooden sword softly moved as if dancing.



Even after receiving Ayato's blow, not only did she not ward it off, she drew it towards her invitingly.

At the same time she twisted her body, Ayato's sword, which did not slow down at all, came down to Haruka's back. Moreover, just ahead of that, there was Saya's pistol which had just now fired light balls which were close to exiting its muzzle.

"Wha!?"

"...Huh?"

Saya's pistol detonated almost at the same time his sword tip unavoidably met its muzzle. A voice of surprise leaked from both Ayato's and Saya's mouths.

"Wow...!"

Although it was a Lux, even though its power was adjusted for self-defense, the shock alone would be huge if the muzzle was blocked and Saya fired accidentally.

The cutting edge of Haruka's wooden sword stopped right before the eyes of Ayato who was sent flying and fell on his back.

"..."

Ayato looked at it in utter amazement for a while, but as he finally pulled himself together just a little, he first asked his sister what he wanted to hear the most.

“What was that just now...?”

“First. 'Amagiri Bright Dragon Style' Hidden Technique, < Banish Evil Spirits>.”

Haruka answered while broadly laughing.

“Simply put, it’s a technique that freely induced attacks of multiple opponents and made them attack each other. Something like that.”

“Hidden Technique—”

Ayato’s densho^[21] was still at the Intermediate Techniques. The Hidden Techniques were a domain beyond that.

“I heard that one can’t use the Hidden Techniques unless one extends their perception to the limit, but...”

“Hmm. I guess. Actually... I’m not allowed to teach you that much. Though.”

As Haruka said that she stored her wooden sword and then held out her hand to Ayato.

“I think that Ayato and Saya-chan’s coordination was splendid. It’s not flattery, but, let’s say that what I perceived was wider than what you two saw.”

As Ayato stood up, Haruka likewise lent a hand to Saya on the ground to help her stand up.

“...Wider?”

To Saya's face, which showed that he did not understand well, Haruka, after thinking a little, continued her explanation.

“For example, when it comes to fighting, if you are sensitive enough, you are able to detect slight subtleties such as the opponent's breathing and motions even before delicate movements. Right?”

“...Yeah.”

Saya nodded.

“The more such information increases the better you'll be able to counter any movement of the opponent. Let's say that widening it, from not only just at the opponent but, to the surrounding space is what the area of Hidden Technique is. In the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style... that state of mind is called 'cognition'.”

It was an explanation that felt like they understood and yet at the same time did not.

But, one thing was clear, it was that Saya and Ayato lost. Unfortunately. They understood that only too well.

“But this isn't really just about fighting. After all, when our options to live as humans become invariably restricted, there are times when we will inevitably reach these limits. I wonder, at such times, whether or not they might look out for more possibilities, from various things and aspects, not recognized before. —Well... it may be still too early for you two to understand that though.”

Said Haruka while she lightly laughed and fondly patted Ayato's and Saya's heads.

“—In the end, even after all our planning, we weren't able to win even once against Haru-nee.”

Saya said, sitting on Ayato's dorm room bed, and dropped her shoulders in disappointment.

“Nee-san was really strong after all... Even though she always seemed so carefree.”

“...Well. I can say the same thing to you.”

Saya argued and then asked.

“How was it after I moved out?”

“The same. I didn't win even once.”

Ayato said so with a sigh and raised both his hands.

After Saya moved out, it was only, about one year had passed until his big sister disappeared

In that one year, he personally intended and worked tirelessly to become as strong as what Haruka had shown but, — even so, as expected, he was no match for his big sister.

“...I see.”

Saya briefly muttered so and jumped from the bed.

And then, as she walked up to the window, she looked back in there and said.

“If it’s the case, How about finding Haru-nee by all means and take revenge? You and me.”

At Saya’s words, Ayato was a little surprised — and then, he slightly laughed.

“Yeah, that’s right. Though I think we probably can’t win yet.”

“...At that time, then, we should fight together again. Like we did at that time. So, how about that, Ayato.”

“Hmm?”

“Even now, in hard times, we should do so. Also, besides me, there is definitely someone who will help you out... Though it’s a little mortifying.”

Saya said with a somewhat sullen face and disappeared outside the window.

As Ayato saw her off with a painful smile he quietly closed the window.

It was just around the time when dusk had begun to dye the sky red.

Chapter 6 – The Second Key

“—You look a little better now.” Julis said, as soon as she took a look, to Ayato who just entered the waiting room.

It was the day of the quarterfinals.

“Well, somehow, thanks to you.”

“Does it mean that you have strengthened your resolve?”

Catching Julis’ surveying look... Ayato slowly nodded.

“Yeah. I have decided. I will look for Nee-san. —For that... Borrowing the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s power is the fastest way.”

“...I see.” Julis joyfully smiled.

Immediately after that she tightened her expression and opened a space window.

“Then. We must first win today’s match.”

When Julis operated the portable terminal, which she held in her hand, a pair of a boy and a girl, who looked very much alike, were projected there. It was the opponents that they would confront a few hours from now; The Li siblings.

“There are two trends, which can be grasped from the past data. First, those twins only aim at their opponent’s weakness

thoroughly, — in other words, they take the strategy that their opponents will dislike the most. Of course, you may say that it's the basics of a fight in its own right, but I think... that even such a thing is secondary to them."

"When you say 'secondary', do you mean that for them, there is something more important than that?"

As Ayato asked about it Julis frowned in displeasure.

"Probably. From my opinion the technique those twins regard as most pleasant, is to torment their opponents."

"Torment. Huh..."

Certainly, even from Ayato's perspective, there was the impression that the twins loved to torment their opponents more than necessary.

"For them... Even winning is also probably something secondary. Well, in one word, they are 'sadists' drunk with power."
"

"...It's not much the type you want to get along with."

"You're quite right. And there is another trend — these twins never act rashly. They create an absolutely advantageous situation for themselves and they only begin their offensive after ensuring a safety zone. Although they are reputed to be very prudent, one can only see that they are mean cowards who are afraid to get themselves hurt."

Julis seemed to be somewhat amazed while saying these words.

In fact, with Julis' character and creed, it was an opponent whom she could never become compatible with.

"Even so, there is no doubt that those twins' ability is the real thing. In addition, they are extremely clever in making good use of strategy. The essence of their strength doesn't come from the height of their technique in Star Senjutsu but probably from their, unique to them, combination of ability and strategy composition."

"Come to think of it... Song-san and Luo-san has also said that."
"

"Yeah. Those two's words are probably right. In a battle to iron out a plan... I'm probably no match for those twins." Julis frankly admitted.

Even if Julis' tactics could directly aim at the opponents during their unguarded moments they still could not entrap them. That was something purely based on their particular character so, and on that point, it could not be helped that she was no match for the twins.

"However, for only this time, we also have some advantageous points." Julis broadly grinned.

"Advantageous points?"

“Yeah. If the twins use the specific strategy of aiming at their opponents’ obvious weaknesses, this time, won’t it be extremely easy for us to know their aim?”

“Ah!” Ayato clapped his hands.

“...My seal. Huh.”

“Yeah. To be more precise, the twins will aim at the limit. For them, there is no more desirable weakness than this. In that case, naturally, we may expect the strategy that they will come up with.”

“—Time-buying.” At Ayato’s words, Julis nodded.

“Most likely. Well, with that in mind, what kind of measures we will take is the problem, but ideally speaking, instantly bringing them down by applying a swift attack would be best. If we can first defeat even one of them... The match would be almost decided.”

However, even while saying so, Julis shrugged her shoulders.

“That said, honestly, this will be difficult. There is no doubt that the twins will take counter-measures of some sort. They will certainly be on guard.”

“I guess...”

Someone who used a plan, always first began by calculating the opponent’s movement. In this case, the twins should first assume

that an opponent with a time limit would attempt to setup a swift attack. There was no way that they would not undertake counter-measures.

“There. Regarding what to do...” Julis somehow lowered the volume of her voice and explained her strategy.

“...I see.”

“It’s not a bad idea. Is it? I mean, honestly, I wouldn’t be lying if I said that it was the best I could come up with.”

“No, even I don’t think that I can come up with a better strategy . Let’s go with this.”

He lightly simulated it in his head and the result was excellent. If he had to say something, it was that the timing of the finish was difficult, but it was already a usual thing and it was too late to be concerned about it.

“Hmm. I see, then, let’s work out the details based on this premise.” Julis said so with a somewhat relieved face.

『Now, now, I guess everyone has been waiting long for this! At last... The quarterfinal match is about to begin even in this Sirius Dome! First, from the east gate, the ones making their appearance are the Seidoukan pair Amagiri Ayato/Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld!』

And then on the other side! From the west gate is the entrance of the World Dragon Seventh Institute pair Li ShenYun/Li ShenHua!
"

『"Oddly, like in the fifth round, it is also a Seidoukan vs. World Dragon match."

『"That's right! Still, all the matches are already over in other stages, and among the best four, up to three frames have already been decided! And now, which pair is to fill the last frame?"

While the earsplitting great cheers, which increased in volume, almost to a level that drowned out the voice's of the commentator and reporter, resounded as Ayato and Julis slowly stepped into the arena.

"...It feels like the voltage is at its climax."

"This Phoenix will soon reach the final stage. After all. They're probably fired up just by watching." Julis said curtly.

As she put a hand on her waist and looked at Ayato with a sidelong glance.

"More importantly... Sasamiya and Toudou have safely won through. We can't afford to stumble in here."

As the commentator said the other quarterfinal matches were all already over; Saya and Kirin had safely advanced to the semifinal.

Ayato and Julis had seen their match broadcasting in the waiting room; including the other matches, one might say that it was indeed the expected results.

The members of the best four that had currently been decided were Saya/Kirin of Seidoukan Academy, the True Knights duo of St. Garrardsworth Academy and — the autonomy type puppets pair, Ardi and Rimsi of Allekant Academy.

“—I know. I’m fired up.”

Ayato strongly grasped Ser-Versta's activation body and answered so.

"That's right. I can't afford to stumble in a place like this...!"

"...Is that so? Then it's fine, but, don't be fired up more than necessary."

Julis observed Ayato with a slightly dubious face but she immediately turned her gaze forward.

The twins of World Dragon were coming over in their direction.

"Nice to meet you. ^{Gruene Rose} Petalblaze Witch and Murakumo. I am Li ShenYun."

"I am Li ShenHua. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

The two greeted so with a light smile on their faces.

At any rate, looking at them up close like this, they surprisingly truly looked so much alike. Because World Dragon's uniform was loose, and their body's lines could not be seen, one could tell them apart only with the chignon on ShenHua's head.

"...What the heck do you want?"

On the other hand. Julis briefly replied without concealing her wariness.

"No. We thought that we should apologize just in case."

"Apologize? You say?"

"Yes, the other day, our peers seemed to have displayed a shameless match..."

"And as disciples of the same master... we are just ashamed."

The twins talked as ShenHua, without any pause, took over from ShenYun's words.

"Peers... Are you talking about Song and Luo?"

"I don't think that those two were cowardly though."

As Ayato turned his gaze ShenYun exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders.

"No, no, we would be troubled if the <Divine Revelations>'s personal pupils are considered at that level."

“So. We will show you a world that those two have not shown you.”

“—The depths of the Star Senjutsu. That is...”

The twins, alternately spanning the sentence between the both of them, happily rumbled their throat.

“Is that so? Then. I will look forward to it.”

Saying that, Julis removed her gaze from the twins, so as if to say that, she had no more to say.

The twins, who also saw it, quickly turned their backs and returned to their earlier position.

“...Humph. That’s blatant provocation. As expected. They are repugnant fellows.”

Julis spat a candid curse (abusive language) towards their back.

“But, by actually meeting them, I understand that they are opponents against whom we can’t let our guards down.”

Though Song and Luo had also talked to them, before the match, the meaning was completely different.

For those two. The earlier conversation was probably a part of their strategy.

“Well... It’s fine. We just do what we have to do.”

“You’re right. Well then...”

As Ayato answered so he raised his prana.

Power overflow from the depths of his body and the chains binding him creaked.

“—Secret sword bound by the prison of stars. Release your might!”

The swelling pressure flicked them (chains) off before long, and a huge amount of prana flew up at the same time.

『“Uh-oh, there is it, there is it! Player Amagiri’s performance! ...Ah no, it wasn’t a performance, right Tram-san?”

『“We don’t exactly know, since the ones concerned haven’t told us about it, but the majority think that it’s probably a necessary process in order to release the power, which is restricted. Judging from the fight in the fifth round, there also seems to be a certain interval in the limit release... I think that player Amagiri’s ability is indisputably first class, but when taking this into consideration, his matches so far were also quite just.”

『“I see, I see... Meanwhile. It’s finally the time for the beginning of the match! To which pair will the goddess of victory smile?”

As expected of the commentator, her remark was sharp. While inwardly smiling wryly, Ayato activated Ser-Versta.

He adjusted his breathing and focused his attention.

“Phoenix quarterfinal fourth match. Battle start!”

At the same time with the declaration of the game start, Ayato instantly shortened the interval between him and ShenHua, and aimed at her, slashing with Ser-Versta diagonally from the shoulder. It was the perfect timing for a quick attack, but as she expected this, ShenHua dodged it by leaping back.

“Tsk!”

“Fufufu, you’re indeed fast! But. I can dodge it if I know it is coming!”

It was also the same as with Irene but, as expected, Ayato’s speed did not seem to give him an absolute advantage at this level.

“Bloom proudly — Dancing ^{Primrose} nine-spirering-flower!”

Julis promptly activated her ability, but ShenYun, who was one step faster than it, forced his way through.

“Ji ji ru lü ling, chi!”

As ShenYun’s hands made complex signs with fingers^[22], the surrounding space swayed in slow motion. And at the next moment, from around the stage, a dense smoke gushed out with a tremendous force.

“This is — a smoke screen!?”

The smoke covered the whole field in an instant, and Julis had no choice but to cancel the Dancing nine-spirering-flowers. She probably judged that at this rate, aiming at the target would be next to impossible undertaking and that if she was to make one false move, they might also hit Ayato.

Ayato, who also considered that he could directly be hit by an attack, temporarily withdrew.

“Julis. Are you all right?”

“Yes. No problem. But. We were outwitted by this... To think that they would come up with such a move.”

As he returned to Julis’ side by relying on the voice and presence, Julis clicked her tongue in vexation.

Though Ayato carefully explored the surroundings, he could not deeply see through the smoke at all. But, he immediately noticed the discomfort. The smoke was too deep and dark. So dark that it was as if it was not smoky.

“Julis. This smoke is probably fake.”

At these words Julis also surveyed her surroundings with a surprised expression.

“I see. So this is also an illusion...”

ShenYun was an expert of illusion who showed nonexistent things as existent. If so... Then it would be no wonder if this was a fake smoke created with the Star Senjutsu.

“I hear that Li ShenYun’s illusion can reproduce all things but I didn’t think it could also reproduce smoke... But, well, it’s fine. In any case, this smoke will clear up in a few minutes, too.”

“On what basis do you say that?”

As he asked because she asserted quite confidently, Julis answered as if it was matter of course.

“Attacking by creating a situation which intentionally blocks outside vision is a Stella Carta violation after all. Even looking at the past data, those twins have probably never used such a strategy, right?”

“I see. If what is happening is not visible from the outside, foul play can’t be checked, either.”

“That’s also true, in a sense, but... The main reason is because this is entertainment. If the audience doesn’t know what’s going on... They can’t enjoy it.”

It was a more cruel reason than what he thought.

However, as if proving Julis’ words, booing arose from the stands after a while. The smoke suddenly vanished as it gradually grew louder.

“Good grief, the audience these days lacks patience.”

“Geez. They don’t need to be so impatient, after all from now on, it’s the real thing.”

ShenYun and ShenHua, who had moved to the edge of the stage before anyone knew, said while broadly grinning.

For the twins it was probably a satisfactory outcome.

After all — they were able to reduce Ayato’s time for nearly one minute with almost no effort.

“Humph. They are really ill-natured fellows.” Julis annoyingly spat so out.

Although she was more focused on the next technique.

While Ayato also agreed in his mind, he set up Ser-Versta again, and shortened the interval.

“Oh. They are also impatient here. Well, in that case, we shall also proceed with our next move.”

ShenYun’s hands once again made symbolic signs with fingers.

The space around him shapelessly distorted and something vague like a silhouette emerged.

It took the shape of a person before one’s eyes; Four bodies, which looked exactly like ShenYun, and which were standing with a fearless smile, took shape there before long.

“There it is...!”

This was Li ShenYun’s favorite illusion — the so-called “clones (alter egos)”. Even looking at their past matches, ShenYun had used this technique in almost all of his matches.

Of course this was an illusion, it didn't have a material form, but since they were so well done it was almost impossible to distinguish them from outward appearances; Even the movement of prana was artificially reproduced. Moreover, since all the four bodies took different movements, it was even more impossible to read and understand their pattern.



Furthermore—

“Then. I too...”

As ShenHua made signs with fingers... Her figure melted as it vanished.

This was ShenHua’s favorite illusion — the “Hidden Line”. Since like ShenYun’s clones, the presence, the sounds and even the movement of prana were masked by her illusion, rather than simply disappearing, she was almost imperceptible unless one concentrated very hard.

You could say that either was the ideal technique to gain time.

“Well, with this our preparations are set, but”

“At this rate, isn’t it slightly boring to just wait for their attitude like this?”

“Yes. Even the audience would be bored with it.”

“If we don’t enliven it, a little, there might be booing again.”

“That being the case...”

Each of the five “ShenYun” spanned words alternately. It looked they were reproduced even up to the voice.

“—Let’s go flashily with one here.”

As ShenYun and ShenHua made their wrists snap... Scraps of papers suddenly appeared out of nowhere between their fingers.

“Ayato. Be careful — these are talismans.”

Julis set up her thin sword, Aspera Spina and dropped her waist so as to be cautious.

The talismans were a kind of auxiliary items in which the power of Star Senjutsu was loaded. Though they were disposable, the ability activated was multifarious depending on the type of talismans, and their application was effective in various settings.

“But, the real one is among them, isn’t it?”

However elaborated the illusion was, a clone was a clone after all. It should not have a material form. In other words, it meant that except the real one, the talismans were fake, too.

“That’s right, but, tsk, they are coming!”

There. The five ShenYun came to attack at the same time.

Since they did not have weapons some sort of offensive type ability was probably loaded in those talismans.

As Ayato wielded Ser-Versta so as to intercept one of them was easily bisected.

...But, without any response, the body, which should have been cut, immediately reverted back to its original form just by swaying like smoke.

(An illusion, huh—!)

Even if one knew, they were almost indistinguishable. Although another was struck down by the returning katana, there was still no response; the sword slash just slipped through in vain.

“It’s a shame, it’s also a fake.”

The third ShenYun, who appeared as if passing through, grinned while projecting a talisman towards Ayato.

“—Burst!”

At that moment, the talismans exploded with a roaring sound.

“!”

A devastating blast and heat mercilessly attacked Ayato; Ayato rolled on the ground as he was blown off. Although, thanks to the fact that he had seen it several times in the video recording, he was able to reduce the damage by promptly turning his prana into defensive. Still his bones creaked on the impact.

“He~e. So you suffered only that much damage even though you received a depth charge talisman at that short distance.”

ShenYun, who said that as if he was honestly impressed, immediately took distance again and mixed himself with the clones.

“Ayato! Are you all right?”

Julis, who was facing the two remaining ShenYun tried to rush over in a hurry, but—

“—Fufufu. I’ll be troubled if you forget me.”

“Wha...!?”

Suddenly along with ShenHua’s voice, an explosion similar to that of earlier arose before Julis’ eyes.

“Kuaaaah!”

Julis was rubbed by the blast and fluttered about in the air.

“Julis!”

As Ayato reflexively ran off and caught her... Only ShenHua’s laughter echoed out of nowhere.

“Ufufufufu...”

As she probably let it echo on purpose. They appeared to be unable to grasp her position from her voice.

“Guh... I- I’m all right.”

Julis stood up while distorting her face and turned her eyes to Ayato.

“More importantly Ayato. It’s almost about time when your limit becomes severe. Right? I will support you. So bring down Li ShenYun first.”

“...Understood.” Ayato clearly stated.

Some time had already passed since the beginning of the match. He could not waste any more time.

And, if he tried to apply a swift attack, it would be more reasonable to aim at ShenYun rather than ShenHua, whose position he did not know. The clones were troublesome, but still only determining the target was better. Even if he defeated them one by one, he might draw out the real one with the first shot if things went well.

“Unexpectedly, we have splendidly fallen into their plan, but in a sense, it’s also just as we planned. Don’t get impatient.” Julis said while concentrating her prana.

The mana of her surroundings condensed in response to it.

“Bloom proudly — Flaming ^{Livingstone Daisy} Crimson Decapitator!”

Dozens of flame chakrams manifested and sprang toward the five ShenYuns as if guiding Ayato.

“Hmm. So you are coming for me after all.”

One of the ShenYuns muttered, but showed no signs of taking a stance, as he calmly stood stock still. Did that mean he was an illusion, Ayato wondered.

(If so, then I should just ignore it...!)

While Ayato shortened the interval, under cover of the flame chakrams, he instantly made such a judgment.

However. Before his eyes, without warning, a huge wall suddenly appeared.

“—!?”

The flame chakrams, which were ahead of him and were going to attack ShenYun, were all blocked by the wall. The chakrams sprinkled sparks, so as to pierce through the thick wall, but they soon vanished as they used up all their energy.

Ayato promptly leaped horizontally, in order to go around the wall, but this time the space in front of him exploded as if it saw through him.

“Aaargh!”

This time his defense by prana did not make it in time and he was directly hit by the blast.

“Oh. You better be careful. The talismans set by ShenHua are invisible after all.”

ShenYun happily said towards such Ayato.

Set, in other words, traps.

The wall of earlier was probably a talisman for defense use, too. However, *“when on earth did she set them?”* Ayato wondered... After thinking about it, just so far, he immediately realized it was obviously during the time of that smoke screen.

As for the form of her traps, they were close to Julis’ setting type ability, but since a required amount of prana was loaded in the talismans at the time they were made, the caster hardly consumed his/her prana at the time of their use. In other words, as long as the talismans did not run out physically, they could be used as many times as one liked.

If so, then, where and how many talismans were set were both unknown.

“Ayato. Move aside! If we don’t know... Then I just have to burn everything!”

Even if they were not visible, as long as they physically existed there, it was possible to destroy them.

Julis’ ability could especially burn down a wide area at once. — However.

“—Like I say, don’t forget that I’m here, too.”

Then, ShenHua’s voice, who seemed quite happy, resounded behind Julis.

Julis looked back with a surprised face, but it was too late.

“I call forth thunder!”

“Aaaaaaaah!”

A thunder stroke gushed along with a fierce lightning, and a shock as to tear off Julis’ body, ran throughout her. It was ShenHua’s Star Senjutsu.

“Julis...!”

As to hold back Ayato, who tried to rush over, Julis, who went down on her knees, shouted.

“I-I’m fine. So just devote yourself to bring down ShenYun!”

“Ugh...!”

A little more than two minutes have already passed since the start of the match. Thinking about tomorrow or later there was no longer time to lose.

“Understood! Then... I leave ShenHua to you!”

As soon as Ayato said it, he shortened the interval towards the handiest one, ShenYun.

“Yes. Leave it to me!”

While hearing the voice of Julis behind Ayato suddenly braked right, just before ShenYun’s eyes, and stepped aside all at once.

The space before ShenYun waved and exploded a moment later.

(As expected...!)

These talismans were probably of the types which automatically activated when someone entered a certain range.

Currently, the present five ShenYun took distance and were scattered about, but there was no way that they would randomly scatter about just like that. There was a reason in all their actions. Thinking so, naturally, they were to some extent able to mark out the position of the traps set.

“Hmm... You aren’t bad.”

He sliced down, in one breath at the ShenYun before him, who muttered as if impressed — but, there was no response. It was a clone.

However. Ayato immediately pulled himself together and confirmed his next target.

“It’s fine. It will change nothing unless I slice down all five...!”

“Indeed. As expected of Seidoukan rank #1. It looked like ordinary means won’t work on you.”

As he approached the second (ShenYun) ShenYun was also becoming better able to read Ayato’s patterns and evaded. Although, once brought into close range combat, Ayato’s attacks were not something that could be dodged indefinitely.

Even while being exposed to the blast several times on the way, he sliced the second, then the third, but...

"Hmm. Too bad. You are off mark again."

ShenYun's clones, which swayed like a heat haze, laughed as they mocked him.

"Guh...!"

The damage of the explosion and his limit's imminent approach were gradually tormenting Ayato.

— Even so, there were two remaining. Apart from the one who took the position farthest from Ayato, there was only the one in front of him. Either of these two was the real ShenYun.

"Then. It's this...!"

Ayato aimed at the one more behind based on ShenYun's character.

The blow, which greatly mowed down, had been dodged, but from there he took one step forward, turned his wrist over and swung upward.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style First Sword Fighting Skill — "Twin Water Dragons"!"

But. Here was no reaction.

(So, it wasn't the real one...!)

Ayato unintentionally bit his lips. When he turned to face the last one remaining he suddenly fell on his knees.

“Argh...”

“What is it... Have you already reached your limit? You were almost there but it's regrettable.”

ShenYun, who saw it, said as he seemed slightly relieved.

“Ayato!”

Julis, hurriedly ran up to him, but immediately after that, was entirely and suddenly sent flying.

“Urgh!?”

“Hahaha. Nice feeling!”

Suddenly ShenHua's voice, which seemed to be happy, resounded out of nowhere. It was probably her who threw in a direct blow to Julis.

“Guh..!”

Magic circles appeared around Ayato, and shackles of light bound him once again.

Ser-Versta, whose blade disappeared, fell from Ayato's hands with a dry sound. Even while seeing with a joyful expression,

Ayato in such state, ShenYun did not yet approach him as he was wary.

Before long, when the light settled, and Ayato, breathing roughly, had fallen down, ShenYun finally came near him.

“Though I don’t know the reason for your seal, it’s something inconvenient. So. How do you feel now?”

A smile which showed confidence of his victory appeared on ShenYun’s face.

Indeed. They knew that he had a limit. Judging from their fight with Irene they also knew that when he passed his limit he could not even move his body. That’s why they were waiting for it.

However—

“Fufu...”

“Hmm?”

To the smile, that had leaked out, ShenYun unintentionally looked at Ayato with suspicious eyes.

“What is funny?”

“No. It’s nothing. Just. — That the match isn't over yet.”

While saying, Ayato activated a blade type Lux in his right hand.

ShenYun braced himself with a surprised expression — but, it was already late.

As Ayato instantly raised his body, he swung his arm in a straight line

Right. Even if they were aware of Ayato's limit, they did not concretely know how much time it was. This was because they could only use the match with Irene and the duel with Kirin as reference. To the bitter end, they should only have been able to estimate a rough time.

This time, it was a little more than three minutes since Ayato was going all out. Although there was a considerable backlash, but it was not to the extent that he could not move.

This was Julis' strategy. First apply a swift attack; If it does succeed, then fine. Even if it failed, feigning to have fallen into the trap of the opponents time-buying and waiting for a chance by pretending as if the limit had passed. After all, judging from the twins' personality, she was certain that they would not give themselves the finishing blow after settling their absolute superiority. And she was totally right on the mark.

The cutting edge, which Ayato swung, tore off the school badge of ShenYun, who was late to dodge.

—But.

“Eh...?”

There was again no reaction at that blow.

(No way, that can't be...! This is also a clone!?)

Ayato was staring at ShenYun's flickering illusion in blank amazement.

"Oh. That was dangerous. It's indeed 'the discretion is the better part of valor'."

More importantly, as the back space was distorted all along, ShenYun appeared from there with a light smile. The moment ShenYun snapped his fingers, all the five clones disappeared.

"...!"

Ayato finally realized there. In other words — those five ShenYun were all clones and the real ShenYun had concealed his appearance all along with ShenHua's technique... It seemed so.

(But, since when...?)

Ayato, in blank amazement, tried to re-think.

As expected. That was possible on only one occasion — It could only be in the midst of that smoke screen. If so, then it meant that what Ayato and Julis had been fighting since the beginning was an illusion all along.

“Hahaha. So you finally realized. Yes, it seemed, you guys also thought of a good strategy. Unfortunately. That much isn’t enough against us.”

In the expression of ShenYun, who said so, expectation and joy were clearly revealed.

“...No. But when had you have first used the talismans...?”

It was not possible for an illusion to use a real talisman.

So at least, the ShenYun, who had used the first depth charge talisman, should have been the real one.

“Oh. That? That was also a talisman which was set by ShenHua. However. It was a time limit type.”

“Time limit type...”

“Right. The rest was just to choose, at our discretion, the timing and place and set the illusion. It was a little troublesome, but thanks to that, it looked like we made you think that the real one should have been among the five.”

ShenYun exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders.

“—Dive into your range by mingling among the clones... Did you really think that I would do something that foolish?”

While saying that ShenYun turned his wrist and multiple talismans appeared between the fingers of both his hands.

“Well. It would be difficult for the current you to dodge even an attack of this level. Wouldn’t it?”

As ShenYun waved his arms, the talismans, which were released, ran through the air and surrounded Ayato.

Though a moderate speed, it was a speed in which Ayato in his unsealed state, let alone dodge them, couldn't slay them all.

The talismans, which surrounded Ayato, remained in the air as if having been pinned.

“Not yet...!”

“Hmm?”

“Not yet...! I can’t afford to lose in a place like this...!”

“He~e. Even if you do make that kind of face... Yes. I’m very excited.”

Joy spread in ShenYun’s words.

As Ayato re-set his sword while chewing his molars, he tried to forcibly break through the encirclement (of the talismans).

“Oh, I like it, that useless struggle. I’m thrilled.”

But, the talismans, which were one step faster, flickered and exploded.

“Guaaaaaaaah!”

Furthermore, the talismans of earlier, which were blown off, exploded, and Ayato's body was many times flipped off like a ping-pong ball. As his defense was not in time, Ayato, who was thoroughly infringed upon by the shock and heat, stooped to the ground without resistance (helplessly).

"Guh..."

He had bruises and lacerations, and his bones had probably taken considerable damage.

"...Now then, sorry, but it's time to end this."

ShenYun said so and once again took out more talismans.

—But. Just before he released them.

"Ayato! Stretch out your hand!"

Julis' voice struck Ayato's ears.

When he promptly stretched his right hand as he was told, Julis, who flapped in on wings of flame, flew in at low altitude, caught it and continued through.

"Tsk!"

The talismans, which were released, exploded one instant later. As she lost the control due to the blast... The two of them rumblingly fell down on the ground as they were thrown out — but still they somehow escaped the predicament.

“T-Thank you. Julis... You saved me.”

“No, I’m sorry, too. I knew you were in danger, and it took me time to shake off ShenHua.”

As Julis immediately got up while saying so and set up Aspera Spina.

Although Ayato also somehow stood up with his body, which did not move as he wanted, he immediately fell on his knees as he had apparently suffered considerable damage.

“Geez. Don’t push yourself so much. You understand that you are no match for ShenYun in your current state, don’t you?” Julis, somewhat angrily, said.

Her gaze was still turned towards ShenYun.

ShenHua appeared all too soon beside ShenYun, and they seemed to discuss something. There was enough distance, and each side adopted a proper stance again. In fact, it was Ayato’s side which was overwhelmingly disadvantaged.

“It is my responsibility to have been so completely outdone regarding strategy. But it’s not a reason for you to act so recklessly.”

“That’s...”

“We’re in a tough situation but we haven’t yet lost. Don’t be in such a hurry.” Julis said as to admonish him.

As she suddenly revealed a small smile.

“But... Frankly speaking, I’m somewhat glad, too.”

“Eh...?”

“Your being that much in a hurry is the proof of your desire to win. It’s probably because you become aware of your desire to save your big sister.”

At Julis’ words... Ayato nodded after a slight hesitation.

“When you said that you would fight for me... Of course I was happy. That’s true. But, at the same time, it was also painful. After all. I can’t do anything for you.”

Julis said up to there and turned to Ayato.

“However, now, this time, you and I are on equal footing. Each of us has a wish, and we think to do our best for each other. And it’s something natural. Because we are partners.”

“Julis...”

“In the first place, if you ask me, you take too much upon yourself alone. Certainly... You do have power for that. The power to protect me and pull through fights. However, that’s why, I will now return to you those words of yours from back then.”

As Julis teasingly laughed and gently spun those words while touching Ayato’s cheek.

“『—In that case, who will protect you?’”

“!”

At that moment.

In the bottom of Ayato’s chest... Something shone.

(This is...)

—And.

“Are you done talking? In that case”

“Let’s resume the fight.”

ShenHua and ShenYun said so with a fearless smile.

“It looks like they have finished their preparations. They have probably again prepared a lot of invisible talismans. But...”

“Julis.”

“...Hmm?”

As Ayato briefly called out to her, Julis, who had shifted her attention to the twins, suspiciously turned her head.

“—Thank you.”

Ayato said so with a sweet smile.

Julis glared at such Ayato's face for a while with a dumbfounded face, but as she suddenly came to her senses, she turned away with a bright red face.

"W-What is it so suddenly? I haven't really done anything which required you to thank me!"

"No, I woke up, thanks to you. This time, that is."

Ayato adjusted his breathing, slowly stood up, and stood at Julis' side.

"So. I have something to ask to my partner. May I?"

"...Let me hear it." Julis replied.

Her face was still a bit red.

"Can you buy some time. Just for a little while?"

"Hou~u? Did you come up with a plan?"

"It's not really that. But... there is something I want to try. If things go well... We may somehow manage to do something about this situation."

"—Understood. Let's try it. We don't have any other card to play anyway. However, I won't hold up for very long. You know?" Julis said so and took a step forward.

Searing the image of her back into his memory... Ayato slowly closed his eyes. He focused his consciousness within himself and thought back upon Saya's words yesterday and Julis' words today.

And then, his big sister's words, at that time. — What he should do.

Then again... A small light shone deep down in his heart. Ayato softly reached out to it.

What this was... Ayato intuitively understood.

This was—

Julis was surprised at herself.

At the time of this adversity, for some reason, she could not stop her heart's exhilaration. She felt like she could not lose to any opponent at this time. — Well, she did not think so far, but there was no doubt that her willpower was at its climax.

Although her body ached here and there, compared to Ayato, who took ShenYun's attacks throughout his body as the vanguard, for Julis, who had only received harassing-like strikes little by little from the vanishing figure of ShenHua, it was a thoroughly preferable situation.

[But I see. That was probably Ayato's natural smile.]

Julis recalled Ayato's smile just earlier, and broadly smiled without knowing it.

She had many times seen Ayato smiling but it was the first time that she saw such a carefree smile. It was probably the true face of Ayato who was always somewhat elusive and buoyant.

[So Sasamiya also witnessed that in their old days...]

She unintentionally said "It's unfair" in a small voice.

Noticing herself thinking so... Julis shook her head and changed her mood. As she looked again to the front, the twins who still had plenty of room to spare, were staring at Julis with grinning faces.

"Oh my. Why does the ^{Gruene Rose} Petalblaze Witch fight alone?"

"You surely don't think that you could take on both of us alone, do you?"

"...It's indeed that. Is it bad?" Julis said

As the twins shrugged their shoulders in unison.

"Haah... It looks like we are seriously underestimated. ShenHua."

"Yes... It's regrettable. ShenYun."

Contrary to their words there was no sign of smiles which had disappeared from the twins' faces.

"Oh well. I don't know what you are plotting. But..."

"Let us enjoy ourselves accordingly."

ShenHua made signs with her fingers and as if melting, her figure disappeared.

"—Humph. I will be troubled if you underestimate us that much."

Julis muttered so and concentrated her prana. If it's like this... She also must not hold back.

While moving so that the twins were away from Ayato as much as possible...she released her power.

"Bloom proudly — Flame Phoenix ^{Ranunculus} Flower of Heavy Waves!"

At the same time as Julis swung Aspera Spina downward, several heavy flame waves radially surged around her.

"Kyaa!"

"Tsk!"

Scorched by the heat waves that could not be dodged the twins raised a small scream.

It was a range attack, which covered about one third of the stage, — though originally intended for defensive use, something used as a check when surrounded by many people. The offensive ability itself was also quite high.

However, even so—.

“...I see, so you are rather aiming at our talismans.”

ShenYun muttered. Seeing explosions bursting all over the stage

Right. At least with this, within the ability's range, she should have been able to burn down most of the talismans which had been distributed earlier throughout out the stage. Moreover, the Flame Phoenix Flower of Heavy Waves would keep sending out waves of flame within it's effective range as long as she maintained it. The prana consumption was intense but the twins would not be able to easily approach her either.

In the meantime... Julis concentrated her prana for another technique.

Using another technique while maintaining the Flame Phoenix Flower of Heavy Waves was technically and substantively severe for the prana consumption, but she had no leisure to grumble about such things now.

“Hmm, quite interesting... in that case, we shall slightly change our plan.” ShenYun said.

As he performed a sword mark with a quick move.

"Ji. Ji. Ru. Lu. Ling. Chi!"

At that moment... A huge quantity of water gushed out of the sky.

"Wha!?"

It suddenly covered the entire stage at an enormous rate. Filling up from the ankle, to the knee and until around the level of the thigh in the blink of an eye. It was as if the stage turned into a sea or something.

[It isn't cold... Does it mean that this is also an illusion...?]

"I hope that you didn't think that my illusions were only clones. Originally something so flashy is not of my liking."

"...So what? Such a thing is just an illusion after all." Julis spat out.

ShenYun giggling and shrugged his shoulders.

"Indeed... It's just an illusion. But for some reason... It seems that your ability slightly loses its heat."

"Argh...!"

To put it plainly. Strega's and Dante's abilities were techniques which embodied image. If they were to fall into confusion... The image's power would also decrease inevitably. In other words...

ShenYun currently set an attack on Julis' constructed flame image using an illusion of water.

"But, this much...!"

Julis focused her mind and maintained the required prana.

"Hmm. Then what about this?"

As ShenYun snapped his fingers multiple ice arrows appeared overhead.

"Go!"

Under a word of command... The ice arrows poured down towards Julis.

"...!"

Julis, promptly shutting her eyes, let them go past. This time it was probably an attack aimed at her concentration. But an illusion is an illusion; It had no effect as long as you didn't look at them.

"I see, from the point of letting the illusion go past, it's a wise way of bearing it. But... I cannot accept that you close your eyes in the middle of a fight."

ShenYun said with a slightly joking tone.

"—Then. Shall I aim at your partner next?"

"!"

At these words Julis reflexively opened her eyes.

And as if waiting for that moment... A huge ice arrow pierced through Julis' chest.

"Guh...!"

By the time she realized and was able to surmise it... It was already too late.

Even if she was telling herself that this was an illusion it could not stop the fact that her concentration was disturbed. The flow of prana was ripped, and she could no longer maintain the Flame Phoenix Flower of Heavy Waves.

"Fufufu, well you did do your best ... It's a shame."

That voice could be heard directly behind Julis.

"Damn—"

As she hurriedly braced herself for the attack of ShenHua who was invisible. Then, as predicted, she felt the hit — probably with a kick — aimed directly at Julis' chest.

"Kuaaaaaaah!"

"Fufufu. Does it hurt? Yes. I guess it hurts. After all, there, it's the place where Luo's attack directly hit you before."

ShenHua, who quietly reappeared, shook her shoulders as she giggled. Certainly that place was where she had been injured during the match against Song and Luo. But, earlier than the pain, a question floated in Julis' mind.

“W-Why didn't you aim at the school badge...?”

She should have been able to end it with the timing now.

“Fufufu. My aim had only just swerved a little.”

Kneeling on one knee, as Julis glared at her even while warping her face in pain, ShenHua bragged so with a slandered face. Intentional atrocities were violation of the Stella Carta but it could hardly be applied for minor infractions such as this. Naturally, the twins probably knew it.

“Hmm. I see...! Oh well. Then you should regret this as much as possible!”

Even while enduring the pain Julis released the technique which she had just barely prepared some time ago.

“Come out — Falling Crimson Flower of Molten Sky!”

A magic circle shone and a huge flame Camellia opened its bud above Julis.

“Wha!? W-Wait, don't tell me, a suicide attack—!?”

ShenHua disappeared in a hurry but it didn't matter anymore. Even if the opponent was invisible... Julis just need to burn down all her surroundings.

The blast swirled at the same time the flame Camellia fell, and intense heat and flames ran through.

However, in the central part where the explosion was the most intense, Julis stood up without bearing one burn.

“If possible, I didn’t want to show this, but...”

Julis muttered with a painful expression.

It was for the damage she received earlier but, above all else, it was painful for her to have shown her valuable trump card.

Even so, if she could bring down one of the twins with this, it would not be that bad — she thought.

“...I see. So you can resist your own ability.”

From the other side of the swirling explosive flame... A voice resounded.

“—!?”

As soon the incredibly explosive flames settled she could see that a huge wall had risen up over there. Moreover. It was not just a simple enclosure but one which combined multiple walls.

“I have heard that it was possible for those with high level ability... Honestly, I was surprised. You’re more than what the rumors say... Petalblaze Witch.”

Gruene Rose

The walls flickered and disappeared. The two ShenHua and ShenYun were standing there unscathed.

“...The one surprised here is me... <Illusion Projection Genesis Arising>.”

Just now, it should have been the perfect timing. Even if they tried to defend by making a wall, they could not possibly defend against that explosive flame with just one or two. Those twins cooperated in that instant and accomplish that exploit (of exploits) by making an enclosure.

[Character-wise, they are not people to praise, but their combination is the real deal...!] Julis thought.

In fact, for ShenYun who still had a composed expression, it seemed to be a fact that it was very dangerous. As he observed ShenHua’s face which had somehow turned pale, he said.

“You were too careless just now. ShenHua.”

“S-Sorry. ShenYun...”

“Haah... Well. It’s fine if you understand. So, it looks like we can no longer afford to play with her.”

A serious light was lit in ShenYun’s pupils.

“—Let’s end this already.”

ShenYun took out more talismans and gradually shortened the interval.

The moment when Julis were lured by it and stepped back — her feet suddenly flickered.

(A talisman—!?)

It was probably a trap set by ShenHua when she was allowed to approach a while ago. A certain number of chains suddenly arose from the ground, twining about Julis’ body like a snake, and arrested her.

“Guh, this...!”

Observing the scene with emotionless eyes ShenYun shot the talismans out. Obviously there was no way that Julis could dodge them while immobilized as she was. The talismans exploded before Julis’ eyes and, because she was unable to defend against them, was sent flying.

“Gaah...”

She she was tossed and rumblingly rolled on the ground. She finally fell down on her back without even able to utter a voice.

“Oh. To think that you are still conscious; You’re stubborn. Well it’s fine... I will now deliver the final blow.”

Julis heard ShenYun's voice as if from far away. At this moment ... Julis was about to give up—

“!?”

All the sudden... Shocked by the overwhelming amount of prana which suddenly emerged, the twins and Julis were all together captivated.

The shine, which Ayato owned, was the “key.”

It was needless to say what kind of “key” it was. It was of course the “key” to undo these binding chains which admonished Ayato. It seemed that Ayato will only recognize it once he begins to meet the fixed requirements.

Ayato had looked at himself in his mind in order to examine himself. In regards to the binding chains of imprisonment, which admonished him — upon close inspection, three locks had been applied there. The first lock had been forcibly broken in order for it to be opened. At first glance, one could see that it was severely broken in such a way that it was irreparable.

Ayato happened to have an idea about it. At the time when he was subjected to this seal by his big sister and was confused — it was during that time he had resolved himself and tried to break it

by brute force. When he had done it for the first time, the image that had floated into his head was the figure of this lock breaking.

Ayato, only half confident, inserted the “key” into the second lock.

As he slowly turned it, the lock clicked wholeheartedly, with a wonderful sound, as it came off.

A part of the binding chains loosened, fell and disappeared in the void.

Immediately after... — **Power** welled up.

“...”

He opened his eyes and checked his physical condition. Prana did not become a pillar of light and rise up as before. He felt that all of it was filled in his body.

“Okay. I can do it... I guess.”

Ayato turned his gaze around and instantly grasped the situation. He felt that it was a very close call for Julis... It seemed that he somehow made it in time.

He picked up Ser-Versta, which had fallen to the ground slightly earlier, and activated it.

“Okay...!”

Ayato ran up to Julis' side, almost instantly, and severed the chains which were coiling around her body.

"Sorry for the delay. Julis."

"...It was really close... Ayato."

Julis wryly smiled with a relieved expression.

"Is the seal completely broken...?"

At that question... Ayato slightly shook his head.

"No. It seemed like it can be somehow lifted step by step (gradually); Let's say that I'm actually at the second stage. And besides... It's not as if it's particularly making me more powerful."

"Is that right? No. But this prana is..."

"Yes. This is only able to contain the prana which was leaking out from within me so far. So the power itself isn't that much different to what I had in my unsealed state. But, on the other hand I think, that the time limit is prolonged."

"How long can you hold?"

"Well. Let's see..."

Ayato compared the power he had within him now with the power he had before, and tried to make a rough estimate.

“Probably. More than one hour.”

“...”

Julis steadily stared at Ayato as she was at a loss for words.

“—Is that so? Then... May I ask to rest? Honestly. I’m already at my limit.”

“Understood.”

Ayato answered so and turned to face the twins.

“It’s just like you see, so this time, I will be your opponent.”

ShenYun, who was looking at the powered up Ayato with a surprised expression, took a deep breath.

“You guys are really full of surprises. That power, don’t tell me, you have been preserving it so far...”

“Well. Many things have happened. What will you do? Will you once again try to buy time?” Ayato asked.

“No. I will pass.” ShenYun quickly said.

As he again took out multiple talismans with both hands.

ShenHua, so far silent and with a serious face, made herself disappear.

“Now... Then.”

Ayato calmly analyzed the situation while setting up Ser-Versta

—Needless to mention the present results... The odds were still, overwhelmingly, disadvantageous.

Anyway. It was not as if Ayato powered up just because his time limit increased or that his injuries were healed. In other words, regarding the power, it was still not that much different from before.

On top of that, including ShenHua, it was a two-on-one this time. Since he was led around by the nose by ShenYun until a while ago, one could say the situation rather grew worse.

Nevertheless, with the outflow of prana, which stopped, there was one thing he was now able to do.

[It's been a long time after all... So I don't know how much I can do]

Ayato closed his eyes once again.

However. This time it was not in order to look within himself but to heighten his perception of the immediate surroundings.

As he expanded his perception to the limit, let alone the opponents' movements and the prana flow, he also comprehensively grasped the information of the sound, the air, and each and every place. This was the state of "cognition".

Since the prana outflow had only been perceived as a “noise”, up until now, he hadn't been able to succeed. But now—

“Phew...”

Ayato's eye's, reflecting the present unchanging physical environment, slowly opened. He actually felt that his perception had extended and could perfectly grasp the reality, rather than the image, of everything within range.

“—All right.”

Ayato casually took a step forward.

He advanced forward and mowed down the seemingly empty space before him, with Ser-Versta in one hand, while the hidden talismans that appeared were split in two and burned out. Ayato was cutting through the invisible talismans, one after another, as he was advancing at a leisurely pace. Though these were the remaining talismans that Julis had failed to burn off... The present Ayato was able to accurately figure out where and how many of these talismans, which would normally be invisible to him, were set.

“No way... Do you see them?”

ShenYun muttered with a surprised expression. He did not see them. He just knew.

“In that case...!”

ShenYun released all the talismans in both his hands all at once and surrounded Ayato who was then fully Encircled by twelve pieces of depth charge talismans.

However. Ayato proceeded forward without being flustered in the least. The talismans exploded as a matter of course arising one after another in a chain of heavy blasts. But... Ayato had just barely evaded every one of those explosions. Ayato could perfectly imagine both the scale of the explosions and the routes to fend them off.

[—Right rear. Huh]

Ayato dodged ShenHua's attacks, which came from behind him by moving just half a step over. He then lightly pushed the shoulder of ShenHua, who was not visible, and shifted her axis off center.

"Eh...?"

"First 'Amagiri Bright Dragon Style' Hidden Technique, < Banish Evil Spirits>!"

ShenHua's attacks, which were prompted by Ayato, directly hit ShenHua's own talismans, which had been previously set in the front.

"Kyaaaaaaah!"

The talismans mercilessly exploded and ShenHua's technique was instantly broken by the initial impact. Her body, crumpled by

the explosion, reappeared while limply dancing in the air and her school badge was adroitly cut down as Ayato advanced by.

“Li ShenHua. School badge damage.”

“Damn...!”

As the school badge announced ShenHua’s defeat and, as expected, impatience clouded over ShenYun’s face. He greatly took up a distance and prepared to set up his talismans.

“This is a truly unexpected development. But... I have also prepared a trump card...!” ShenYun said.

As and so he extended both his hands and a large quantity of talismans overflowed from his sleeves like an avalanche.

It was hardly a quantity which could fit within a uniform but the Star Senjutsu was probably such a thing. The talismans, which still overflowed, soared up like a tornado and, just like that, started forming a huge ball above ShenYun.

If these were all depth charge talismans... Then it would possess a tremendous amount of destructive power.

“It’s a depth charge sphere woven by using all the talismans I had. You shall fully savor it.” ShenYun said.

As he further made complex signs with his fingers on the spot.

Then, the depth charge sphere greatly swayed, and increased its number as it slightly wavered. One became two, two became four

— and finally eight depth charge spheres surrounded Ayato in the sky of the stage.

“Of course most of those are illusions. There is just one real... Well. The current you will probably figure it out and dodge it without that much difficulty.”

As ShenYun, who said so, wielded his arms and the huge depth charge spheres started to descend.

“—However. How about this?”

Ayato, who noticed it, looked up startled. As ShenYun said... Ayato had already figured out which was the real one and which were the illusions. That’s why he understood.

[So he is not aiming at me... But at Julis!]

Right. The depth charge spheres were aiming at Julis, who had fallen down on her knees, behind Ayato.

“Tch...!”

Although Julis tried to stand up as she also realized it... She soon fell on her knees again. The depth charge ball’s speed was rather slow, but Julis did not have any technique to tell illusions apart. Moreover, Julis, who was already almost at her limit, would have difficulty dodging them.

“Now, Murakumo, what are you going to do? Abandon her? No. There is no way you would do that!”

ShenYun loudly said so with a complacent smile. He was probably confident that Ayato would go help Julis. That's to jump towards those depth charge spheres; even if it was Ayato, he would suffer heavy damages if he was caught in that explosion.

"Ayato! I'm all right! More importantly... Take care of him—"

"Why don't you shut up a little... ^{Gruene Rose} Petalblaze Witch?" ShenYun said with cold eyes.

He then made signs with his fingers as he moved towards Julis.

"—!"

Lightning gushed out and was going to strike Julis.

However.

"—I see that you are playing dirty to the very end, Li ShenYun."

Ayato, now standing in-between ShenYun and Julis, repelled the lightning bolt with Ser-Versta.

"Ayato!"

"Hahaha! Right, it should be like that, Murakumo! I guess that now neither of you will be able to dodge it. Will you? You should be blown off together!"

Certainly. The depth charge sphere had already drawn near before their eyes.

“There’s no need to dodge it.” Ayato muttered.

As he then poured prana into Ser-Versta’s Ulm mana dite.

As a result the sword blade Ser-Versta, devouring Ayato’s boundless quantity of prana, immediately began to lengthen as a black pattern gleefully danced around it. In an instant its length had grown tremendously and now exceeded ten meters.

The meteor art, which he tried once when he eliminated the pseudo-dragons with Kirin before^[23]. The prana consumption was too intense, and he had thought that he would not be able to use it in a match since it would hasten his limit as a result. With the current Ayato there was no problem.

“Wha...!?”

Ayato then mowed down the real depth charge sphere, which was falling and aiming at Julis, easily bisecting it along with it's illusions. In addition... Ayato, now swinging downward from an overhead position, slashed apart the resulting explosion’s great blast effect, that was starting to erupt from the impact, with one single strike.

“...I-Impossible...”

As Ser-Versta swept over ShenYun, who stood motionless in blank amazement, the long deep slashing attack carved an impression into the stage. However, Ayato let go of Ser-Versta and empty-handed shortened the distance to ShenYun in one breath.

“—As expected, I got a little angry.”

Ayato said and strongly clenched a fist.

“Eh...?”

He then thoroughly drove that fist into the face of the dumbfounded ShenYun...

“Guhaa!”

ShenYun, who did a somersault as he was sent flying, did not seem to change from his initial pose not even an inch.

“So, well, something like that.”

Ayato said to ShenYun, who subsequently fell to the floor of the arena, and then slightly sighed.

“Li ShenYun. Loss of consciousness.”

“End of the battle! Winner; Amagiri Ayato & Julis-Alexia Van Riessfeld!”

Great cheers and ovation like a storm swept over the stage. The reporter and commentator seemed to say something... But it was so noisy that what they were saying was drowned out and inaudible.

As Ayato, though a little tired, turned around and looked back at Julis with a smiling face which expressed a clear joy. She firmly gave a thumb's-up right back at him.

Chapter 7 – Unyielding Feelings

“Congratulations! Princess!”

Flora’s passionate welcome met Ayato and Julis when they returned to the waiting room.

Managing to catch Flora, who’s flying embrace ended with the two vigorously hugging, Julis smiled delightfully.

“Thank you. Flora.”

“It was really. Really amazing! I was very excited!”

Exactly as her words stated, Flora’s cheeks were slightly red, and she buzzingly waved her arms while brightening her eyes shiningly.

This time they could not escape from the winner interview, as expected. But even so, they somehow tip-toed through it with noncommittal answers and had finally been released. Quite a while had passed since the match was over. Still... Flora’s excited state meant that she was very deeply impressed.

“Amagiri-sama was also very cool! What should I do to become so strong? Will I also someday become like that?”

“E-Errr... Well, for the time being, you should never miss daily training.”

“I see! Then... Then, next time, please let me train with you, too!”

“Y-Yeah, that’d be great...”

“Whoopee! Thank you. Amagiri-sama! I will do my best!”

After Julis, Flora embraced Ayato too.

She gave a feeling of a small animal different from Kirin. If compelled for an example; It would be the feeling of a small dog fully brimming with vigor. Kirin gave the feeling of wanting to pat her head but for Flora, if anything, it was the loveliness of wanting to run one’s fingers over her hair.

“Fufufu. I see that Flora is as energetic as usual. I am relieved.”

And at the back of the room... Claudia was happily observing such a pleasant scene.

“What. So you came—well. I guess Flora could not come in here alone.”

“Yes. I did not think that I could meet her in a place like this, so I was a little surprised.”

Claudia said so and merrily laughed.

“Judging from your talk, you seem to be acquainted with Flora-chan, Claudia.” Ayato remarked.

“Yes, we met several times when she served as Julis’ maid.”

“Enfield-sama was always very kind! She also gave me a lot of delicious candies today!” Flora added in...

“Candies...?”

Now that she mentioned it... Something which looked like chocolate was on Flora’s mouth and various types of baked sweets were spread out on the table.

“Yes. This is a present from me. I’m finally on break from work so I had time.”

“Do you mean you have made this, Claudia?”

“It has been a really long time since I stood in the kitchen... I cannot guarantee the taste.” Claudia humbly admitted.

Even if she said that, upon observation, their outward appearance was in no way inferior compared to those sold in shops or—rather than that—they looked better.

“Then, since it’s a rare occasion, let’s eat them. I’m also hungry.”

“Yes. By all means.”

He picked up a cookie coated with chocolate and put it into his mouth...

“—Yes. It’s delicious!”

He could not make a comparison since, he did not usually eat sweets that much, however there was a moderate sweetness that compliments the slightly bitter chocolate. It was a refined taste. You could say that this fragrant and pleasing flavor was quite to Ayato's liking.

"Fufufu. I am glad you liked it."

Claudia said, with her cheeks dyed slightly red, with a delightful smile.

"Still... To think that even Claudia can cook. It's amazing."

Since she was an Ojou-sama^[24] he thought that she would not be good at these kinds of things. But, in reality, it looked as if she could do anything.

"Really, as usual, you're perfect to the extent that it's sarcastic. You just handle about everything as if it is a matter of course... Don't you even have at least one thing you are not good at?"

Julis also picked up a sweet with a somewhat amazed face.

"Oh my! Even I have at least some weak spots, you know? However, this time, I thought that I must also earn some points."

"...Points?" Julis quizzically asked again.

At that... Claudia simply put her index finger up.

“Even though all of you have appealed to him with your homemade cooking... I cannot be the only one left behind. Right?”

“Bufuuh!?”

Julis thoroughly choked over these words...

“I-I didn’t really do that to appeal him or something...! Or rather... How do you know about it in the first place?”

“Fufufu, I wonder how. —Well. Let’s set that aside.”

As Claudia lightly dodged Julis’ question... She suddenly put on a serious expression.

“To both of you, congratulations for your qualification to the semifinals. As the representative of Seidoukan Academy... I would like to express my joy and gratitude.”

She said so and deeply bowed her head.

“No. We haven’t really done anything for which you need to be grateful...”

“That’s right! In the end... I am only fighting in order to fulfill my wish.”

“That might certainly be so. However, judging from the viewpoint of the current season’s general record, the present

Seidoukan was able to get more points than expected. After all, for the first time in several years, you are among the best four. It's really helped us."

"Well, I don't feel bad from being honestly praised by you. But, which reminds me, have you also gone to see the other pair?"

"Yes, their match was earlier after all, I greeted them before stopping by here."

Needless to say that the other pair was Saya and Kirin.

"I took the opportunity to invite them to come here with me. But... They said that they have to prepare for tomorrow's match."

"Hohou~u, as expected, they are really into it."

"It's the opponent of fate after all..."

Saya's and Kirin's next opponents were at last the autonomous puppets of Allekant. It was the opponent, which triggered Saya's participation in this Phoenix; They displayed their overwhelming power in all their matches.

Ayato was also interested in how those two would confront them.

"Since you have all come so far... I would, by all means, like to see a fight between fellow students of Seidokan over the championship."

At Claudia's words Julis strongly nodded.

“Of course. This is our intention. And. Probably — theirs too.”

“At last! All the best four are known.”

Sitting on the chair of the work room the Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Festa, Madiath Mesa, greatly exhaled.

“Yes. Although this year’s Phoenix was in a slump in the advance reviews, when looking at the results, it became a stunning climax. Your decision to approve the substitute participation of Allekant was the right choice. As one would expect of the Committee Chairman... What great skill!”

“It’s a little early to call it great success. I mean... There is the possibility that the evaluation would be overturned in the semifinals and the finals.”

“No, no, at the present time, it has already exceeded the last Phoenix in both the entertainment industry profits and the volume of audience mobilization. There is no way that the evaluation will change from here...”

“There is no telling what may happen in the future. Isn’t that why it’s interesting?” Said his older subordinate who lavished on blatant compliments and flattery.

Madiath then operated the portable terminal on his desk and opened up multiple space windows.

The data on the eight players, who had won up to the semifinals in this Phoenix, were projected in the various space windows.

The pair from Allekant Academy, the pair from St. Garrardsworth Academy, and the two pairs from Seidoukan Academy.

“Which pair do you think will win?”

“Huh...? No, I am a Steering Committee member, so I am afraid I cannot give my personal opinion just like that...”

“Hahaha. You’re too stiff. It’s fine. You have my permission. Think of it as a part of your duties.”

“Haah...”

Prompted by Madiath, the subordinate, though looking uneasy, looked at the players projected in the lined space windows.

“Let’s see... Honestly. I didn't think the two pairs from Seidoukan would have come this far either. No matter how good Seidoukan is at the Phoenix, the sluggish wave of their past several years of performances is such a plight that one would like to avert their eyes.”

“Yeah, but in return, they have some kind of momentum. Then ... Will either of these two win?”

“No. Both pairs are certainly excellent, but there are too many unstable factors. It will probably be impossible for them to win.”

The subordinate plainly explained.

Even judging from Madiath’s perspective... This subordinate was not incompetent. Or rather... There shouldn't be incompetent people existing in the core departments of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Taking that into account even he thought this subordinate was a capable man.

Involved with the management of the Festa for many years his discernment, from having watched a lot of players, was reliable enough.

“I see. Then... How about the pair of Garrardsworth?”

“Hmm... I think that the rank #11 of the pair is a skilled Dante but the combination is a little bad. After all... There is no close affinity between their abilities. Unless in extreme circumstances... This is as far as they can go.”

“Which means, — from your perspective, the winning pair will be the puppets of Allekant.”

At Madiath’s words the subordinate politely nodded.

“Yes. Their specs are very splendid. Even when watching their matches so far... It's been a landslide victory in almost all. There is no bill for complaint. From a sound judgment, there is no doubt that the winner will be them. Just...”

“Just?”

For an instant... Doubt spread in the subordinate's pupils.

“No, it’s just that when I think about what kind of influence it will have in the future Festas, it might not be something very delightful...”

“Hou~u.”

“Ah, no, this is not something which the likes of me should poke his nose in. I am sorry.”

The subordinate hurriedly bowed his head.

“No. Don’t say that. It’s a very valuable opinion. Certainly, if the puppets, which have been allowed participation by exceptional measures, were to nab the victory, there will be a lot of people who won’t find it funny. Besides. The fans, even the ones cheering for them now, may find it a little too much if they were to win the championship.”

The exceptional measures of this time were something that Allekant had directly thrust upon Madiath. In other words, if Madiath messed in this matter, it would immediately become a liability issue with him.

“—But well, even if that happens, it can’t be helped that such a thing happens. After all... We just merely provided them the appropriate venue.”

“...That’s right.”

The subordinate said so respectfully. With a face, which showed that he thought of something, he said to Madiath.

“By the way Committee Chairman... Who did you think will be the winner?”

“You want my opinion? Hmm, well...”

Just like his subordinate earlier... Madiath alternately looked at the eight space windows.

“—It will be Allekant.”

“Oh, so you also think that after all.”

“If purely comparing the combat capability that conclusion is incontrovertible. They will, in all probability, reign in this Phoenix ... Oh, it’s almost time, I guess.”

As Madiath said that he checked the clock.

“Oh. It’s definitely time for the liaison conference with Frauenlob. I have taken your valuable time with this idle talk.”

“No. What? Don’t worry about it since it was me who asked for it.”

As Madiath lightly raised his hands... The subordinate left the office after bowing.

Madiath, who saw him off, closed the space windows one-by-one after heaving a sigh.

The two people of Garrardsworth disappeared, Saya and Kirin disappeared, Allekant's dolls disappeared — Julis disappeared.

The remaining was only the space window in which Amagiri Ayato was projected.

Madiath's hand stopped right there.

“—Haruka's younger brother. Huh.”

On the face of Madiath, who muttered so, a pleasant smile floated.

“Yes. Indeed... There is no telling what may happen in the future. That's why it is interesting. That's right.”

—Phoenix, 14th day. Sirius Dome; Waiting room.

“Well then — shall we go soon?”

As Kirin called so out to her, Saya raised her look, which was cast at her hands and nodded with her usual deadpan.

“? What is that?”

Saya was apparently looking at an old piece of paper.

“...This is my lucky charm.” Saya openly declared.

When she showed it to Kirin... It was a handwritten ticket overflowing with hand-crafted feelings. It was probably something made by the hands of children where the words “wish ticket” was greatly written in lovely characters.

“It’s a magic ticket. Which makes any wish come true.”

“Wow... It’s wonderful.”

It was probably a very important keepsake for Saya. Even from the way she used her hands to handle that ticket, it could be deeply felt.

“Ah, then, did you by any chance wish for today’s victory?”

However Saya softly shook her head.

“No. This is just a lucky charm. Today’s victory is something we just have to seize with our power.”

“...You are right. I’m sorry.”

Saya’s words were quite right. With the optimistic thought to rely on something like that... They could not win through this point.

Kirin thought so and once again strengthened her resolve. At the same time Saya put away the ticket in her breast pocket and slowly turned around towards Kirin.

“...Kirin.”

“Y-Yes. What is it?” She frankly asked back.

“—Thank you.” Saya suddenly bowed her head.

“Eeh!? What is it so suddenly?”

“It’s thanks to Kirin’s power that we were able to come this far. I appreciate.”

“O-Oh no. Please stop...!”

To the sudden occurrence Kirin waved both her hands.

“...I wanted to arrive here by all means.” Saya said and tightly clenched her fists.

“In order to defeat the autonomous puppets of Allekant. Right?”

Kirin had also heard of the circumstances which resulted in Saya’s participation in the Phoenix. The gun which Saya’s father made was insulted by a student of Allekant, and she wanted to make her take it back.

However. She had certainly found it a little strange.

She understood that it was very important for Saya, but still, she also thought that participating in the Phoenix just for that was somewhat going too far.

Then, as she guessed what Kirin was thinking, Saya slightly smiled wryly.

“...Kirin. Let me tell you something. My father lost a great portion of his body in an accident at the Institute where he was working.”

“Eh...?”

Since she said it just like that... Kirin, for an instant, could not understand the meaning very well.

"Fortunately. His brain was safe so he then built an atelier^[25] in the house with the compensation money and connected it with the central unit (of his brain). He himself seemed to be satisfied, now that he can move make more precise movements than he could with his actual body, after some getting used to."

"..." Kirin, not knowing what she should say, could only look downward, troubled.

"Don't worry about it. Dad says that it was good, he can now freely research what he likes. I have already come to terms with it too."

“What he likes...” Kirin. Pointing out the obvious.

“—To make guns for me.” Saya said while stroking the Lux activation body that hung on her waist.

“...For Saya-san?”

“Yes. That’s why what Camilla Pareto said was spot on in a sense. After all. This power, rather than being made for many “people”, was created just for one person... “Me”.”

As she exhaled there... Saya closed her eyes once—and then opened them slowly.

“But, even so—that’s why I won’t forgive the fact she denies it.”

Behind Saya's pupils a strong and firm will was shining ardently.

It was an unyielding conviction.

“...Ah. That’s right. Please keep this a secret to Ayato what I said about my father.”

“Why?” Kirin asked.

“Ayato is kind... So I’m sure he will make a fuss about it. I intend to tell him after this tournament is over.”

“...I understand.”

If Saya choose that... Then Kirin would not be the one to butt in

Even while thinking that... Kirin secretly smiled wryly. Saya's concern seemed just like her.

"I'm tired from having talked so much... Let's go." Saya took a small breath and left the waiting room.

"Y-Yes."

Kirin also hung Senbakiri on her waist and hurriedly ran after her back.

The passage leading to the stage was long and dim.

Come to think of it... This was the first time that they had a match in the Sirius Dome. It was not that much different from the other large-scale stages, but as expected, they felt that it was somewhat special to have a match in Asterisk's main stage.

—A little ahead, in the passage, two persons' figures could be seen near the entrance gate.

As Saya also noticed it her pace slightly weakened.

She gradually understood, as the distance drew near, but they were apparently women.

[Allekant uniforms... That means that maybe those people are—]

“Hi, hi, young lady. Long time no see.”

One of them, a woman, who tied up her hair in a ponytail—Ernesta Kühne—started to talk to her somewhat strangely and brightly.

“...What do you want?”

“Oh my, you’re rather cold. Even though we will fight against each other after this it doesn’t really mean that we shouldn’t deepen our friendship, does it? It’s not really like I will tell you to throw the match away.”

“It’s the puppets which will fight. Not you.”

“Hmm, well, that’s right. But...”

She felt that there was no way to get along with Saya.

Kirin did not know what to do in this situation and could only watch the exchanges in a dither.

“It’s just that there is something that our Camilla wanted to tell you before the match no matter what.”

In response to the words, the brown woman, who was so far standing behind Ernesta—Camilla Pareto—took one step forward.

“Long time no see Sasamiya Saya. What, it looks like I have also misunderstood a little, so I thought that I shall say it before the match.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Yes, I have watched your matches and understood. If you look at them individually the luxes you use are all defective. However, through your usage, in other words, when seeing you yourself included with them as one weapon, I have no choice but to admit that it’s powerful without equal.”

At these words, Saya looked at Camilla as if she was surprised.

“Then—”

“But I have no intention of taking back the words I said the other day. When including you yourself, along with the gun, as one weapon, it means that the organic instability rather increases. So it isn't practical after all. And on my—the ^{Ferrovius} Lion Faction’s—conviction and pride, that strain to concentrate a biased power to an individual is inadmissible.”

Ahead of Saya, who was about to say something, Camilla declared.

“...Then, I will just surpass your dolls and make you admit it.”

“It's impossible. If by any chance... Though it's impossible, even if Ardi and Rimsi were to lose to you guys, I would still not admit it.”

At these words, Saya, with eyes filled with anger, stared at Camilla.

“...However, I will take back the words of the other day then. All the technologies, which the Lion Faction and I have piled up, are poured in the armaments of Ardi and Rimsi. If you were to defeat them then even I will admit that it's practical.”

Just as Camilla said all that... She turned her back to Saya and walked off.

“Ah, wai-, isn't it cruel for you to immediately go back after you finish your business? Even though I wanted to ask many things since I'm also interested in that child's armament... Hey. Ah geez, wait! Camilla.”

Ernesta was running after her back while jumping up and down like a frog.

However Ernesta, suddenly stopping, looked back and shouted.

“Well then... I leave our children to your care! Enjoy yourself!” As she excitedly waved both her hands like a child.

This time for sure she disappeared down the passage with quick steps.

“...”

Saya was motionlessly looking at her direction for a while, but she soon turned towards the entrance gate.

“Let's go, Kirin.”

“Yes.”

To the stage, which swirled with lights and cheers, she stretched her legs.

“—We will absolutely win.”

“Yes!”

『“Hi, hi, everyone, thank you for waiting! Like usual, I am the person in charge of the live report in the Sirius Dome, Yanase Miko, and here is the commentator, Tram-san!”

『“Hello!”

『“Errr, and like that, it’s finally the semifinals of the Phoenix! The first semifinal match will be a clash between the Sasamiya Saya/Toudou Kirin pair of Seidoukan Academy and the Ardi/Rimsi pair of Allekant Academy, which became the substitute participants, by special case of restriction, in this tournament! What a pleasure!”

『“After all, it is said that, this match is almost virtually considered as the final round.”

『"Eh? Is that so?"

『"The other one is that, since both pairs had also fairly struggled through fierce battles, they should have quietly accumulated fatigue and damage, too. On that point, after all, both the pairs here today have arrived almost unscathed."

『"Ah, I see, I see. Certainly, it was in such a short time that we could say that almost all the matches of both pairs were instant kills. Still, the Sasamiya/Toudou pair seemed to have a hard fight as such in the previous quarterfinal, but the Ardi/Rimsi pair, on the other hand, have settled all their matches so far in just over one minute!"

『"And what's more... They win even after making that declaration of "not moving even one finger for one minute" in all their matches. As for today's highlight, I look forward to whether or not the Sasamiya/Toudou pair will break through player Ardi's absolute defensive wall without stooping down, and become the first focus."

—Absolute defensive wall.

They were talking about the wall of light deployed by Ardi. Before anyone knew, such a naming spread in the Net, it was completely established now. According to Saya, it seemed to be something which was the downsized version of the defense wall used in the stage. For the moment no one was able to break through it and make an attack reach Ardi.

Then, this time too, Ardi said in a loud voice.

“Listen well! This time, too, I shall give a deferment of one minute. In the meantime, we will not move even one finger. You should freely attack to your heart’s content!”

His figure, which affirmed full confidence, somehow looked more human than the humans themselves.

“...Hmph.”

Saya just glanced at such Ardi and immediately turned towards Kirin.

“Kirin, I leave that one to you.”

“Yes.”

“—Show him what you can do.”

As she lightly nodded at Saya’s words, Kirin unsheathed her sword while turning her look towards Ardi.

They prepared for the battle and changed their consciousness.

“Phoenix, semifinal first game, battle start!”

Even when the beginning of the match was declared, Ardi and Rimsi did not show any signs of movement.

Ardi folded his arms with a daunting pose. It hardly seemed to be the image of someone in the middle of a Pheonix match. That attitude was the very picture of arrogance.

“I, Toudou Kirin, engage.”

As Kirin set up Senbakiri directly straight... She confronted Ardi's imposing figure head-on.

“Hmm, Toudou, huh. I did not think that you would be my opponent.”

Then, Ardi said with a very surprised voice.

“...What about it?”

“What, I expected Sasamiya Saya as my opponent. I am a little surprised.”

“By that... Do you imply that I am lacking as your opponent?”

“To try to break through my defensive wall... It would be more reasonable to have Sasamiya Saya, with her high firepower Lux, as my opponent.”

“...”

“Among the participants of this Phoenix, competing for first place, you certainly possess high physical capabilities to a refined degree. The data proves this. But the weapon you use is not even a lux... Just a mere Nihontou. It would have been another story if it was an Ogre Lux; but, with only this, you will not be able to break through my defensive wall.”

Ardi looked down at Kirin from above and shrugged his shoulders while saying... “Good grief”.

“I will not say anything bad, you can switch with Sasamiya Saya even now; otherwise you two could...”

“—Then, do you want to try?”

Kirin briefly said as she interrupted Ardi’s words.

“What?”

“Check with your body whether Senbakiri and I are not match for you.”

“...Very well. If you said that much then you should try. I look forward to see what you would do one minute from now.”

The moment when Ardi nodded a slash ran by like a flash.

That blow, which was slashed diagonally from the shoulder, was of a speed suitable to be called Godspeed. However, just before the point of the sword reached Ardi’s body, it was repelled by the wall of light, which suddenly appeared.

Even so Kirin, not caring about it, connected a second and then a third slash.

“Hou~u... This is a wonderful speed. To think that a human body could even reach such a domain... I am really impressed.”

Ardi, with still his arms folded, did not move an inch.

Nevertheless, Kirin's attacks were all repelled by the wall of light.

"But, it is useless. No matter how fast you are, you cannot surpass me in reaction velocity since you are a human. In other words, your attacks will never reach me."

To Ardi, who flatly asserted, Kirin pulled her sword once and adjusted her breathing.

"...I see, I get it now. It is already enough."

Kirin, who said so, re-set Senbakiri to a sword fighting style and once again launched a slashing.

"Don't you understand that it's useless..."

—However.

"Hmm...?"

That blow took a roundabout path so as to slip through the wall of light. It made a hard metallic sound and carved a straight scratch on Ardi's arm.

『"O-Ooh, this is amazing! Finally, finally, finally, for the first time in this tournament, player Ardi received an attack! Who would have imagined that Player Kirin would conquer that impregnable absolute defensive wall with a Nihontou!"

The excited voices of both the reporter and the stands greatly rose.

In contrast with it, Ardi was now staring at the wound in his left hand with a dumbfounded face.

“Impossible... It’s unlikely. How on earth...”

“There is still time remaining, right? In that case, please take back your earlier declaration. And let’s have a fair fight.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“Do not look down on us is what I mean.”

To Kirin, who declared so, Ardi shut up bitterly.

And Kirin released a slash in a flash.

The wall of light appeared trying to prevent it, but once again Kirin’s blade slipped through it and dug a sharp scratch on Ardi’s flank.

“Guh...!”

“It’s not a fluke. —If you intend to go on like this until the end, I will end it with the next attack.”

As Kirin said so, she thrust Senbakiri at Ardi.

“...”

Ardi was silent.

Kirin took a small breath and let Senbakiri flash three times.

But, Ardi, who activated his hammer type lux a step faster, attacked Kirin first.

“—!”

As Kirin promptly pulled her sword and dodged that attack, she greatly leapt back and took a distance.

『"A-And, and! There was an attack launched by player Ardi! The time is 56 seconds since player Ardi's declaration! One minute has not yet passed!"

When Ardi rotated his hammer, he planted its ferrule into the ground.

“...Well done! For this one, it is my complete defeat. I shall take back that declaration!”

Ardi unexpectedly, and with dignity, quickly took back his words.

“It seems like I grew a little arrogant. I fully realized that I am still a greenhorn. Therefore — if you don't mind, I want you to teach me what kind of technique you used earlier.”

Contrary to his words, Ardi's attitude was still big.

However, it looked like he had said it in all sincerity.

Although Kirin took a stance, she slowly opened her mouth.

“It’s because you are a machine.”

“...What do you mean?”

Ardi tilted his head to the side as if to say he was unable to understand.

“You have predicted my attacks from my data and movements, and deployed your defensive wall based on it. Haven’t you?”

“Yes, it is exactly as you say.”

And his voice also implied this question “What’s wrong with it?”

“In the Toudou style there is a technique which leads on all factors, such as the opponent’s breathing and line of sight, changes in timing and muscle movements; it’s a constantly changing strategy. However, because you are an excellent machine, I easily guess them all and arrived at an answer greater than the ‘perfect’ you comprehend. Then, finally, I just had to shift only a little from there.”

“I have been led, you say?” Ardi muttered in surprise.

“If this was a fight between skilled fellow swordsmen, a wide variety of mutual reading could have unfolded in the interval of a split second. For example, I think the attack earlier would not have reached Ayato-senpai with one stroke of the sword if he was the

opponent. I had led you on quite unnaturally after all. But because you are a machine you simply reacted to my movements...”

As Kirin stopped there... She completely cut off.

“—In short, you fatally lack combat experience.”

On the other side, Saya was contentedly watching the exchanges between Kirin and Ardi.

“...As expected of Kirin.”

She said so and nodded many times.

“—I can’t understand.”

Rimsi, who confronted Saya, quizzically frowned.

“Hmm? What?”

“That you did not come to attack me during this one minute.”

Right. Exactly as Rimsi stated, Saya, without even deploying her lux, was just watching the exchanges between Kirin and Ardi.

“That slowpoke stupid good-for-nothing’s self-destruction was just reaping what he sowed. That said, to think that she wastes her precious advantage. Isn’t it rather you, who are looking down on us? If that’s the case, then it’s extremely unpleasant.”

As Rimsi said that, and deployed huge gun type luxes in both her hands, she defined her aim to Saya.

“...Unpleasant? I only wanted to fight you seriously.”

Saya, still without losing her calm, finally took out her lux activation body.

“—Otherwise, it won’t have any meaning for me.”

Immediately after that, a rain of light bullets poured down like a storm.

Saya turned aside adroitly just before, thereby nicely dodging it, and jumped. She then activated her lux in mid-air.

“Type 41 - Gleaming Form - Twin Particle Guns Waldenholt.”

She muttered to herself.

It referred to the name of the weapon that her father made for her.

It was, of course, one of the rules that Saya had established for herself.

A large lux with a huge back unit manifested immediately as Saya's hair ornament accordingly deployed into a simple aiming monitor. Multiple gun barrels began covering up, bit by bit, whole entire sections of her left and right arms.



At the same time she landed, while also pouring her prana into the mana dities and avoiding the light bullets, which were relentlessly attacking her, Saya pulled the trigger.

“—<Burst>”

A pale light gathered in front of the muzzle and swelled...

The next moment... Two huge light bullets, along with a shrill firing sound, shot out with a speed as if to tear the atmosphere.

“—!”

Rimsi, who barely dodged the first light bullet, was not able to dodge the second.

A huge explosion sound blasted out and echoed, enough to make one think that the hall might collapse, and Rimsi's body was sent flying until it slammed into the wall on the opposite side. If there was no defensive wall, she would have broken through the wall for sure and might have gone outside the stage.

It was to the extent such that it gave the impression of an overwhelming destructive power.

“Therefore, our preparations are also complete.”

Turning towards where the cloud of dust densely soared, Saya muttered.

“—Come at me seriously.”

As if responding to it... A pair of red eyes shone from within the dust cloud.

Epilogue

In that room, in which the light of the day brightly shone, refined furnishings were arranged with the perfect order. Everything, which existed there, from the curtains of classic design rustling in the wind, a carpet of a calm tint based on indigo and beige, an office desk of ebony in which fine decorative carvings were applied, up to the penholder decorated with gold, which was placed in the corner, built up one space, which harmonized without compromise.

A small world by no means just gorgeous, yet graceful and refined.

In the center of that world, one young man was smiling very happily.

His surprisingly refined features and uncurled pale blond hair were to the extent that, at first glance, one might seem to be confused on whether the young man was not also one of the furnishings.

That frank temperament, the brilliant and strong presence — and above all else, if it was a person with even a bit of a discerning eye, then they should notice that a sharp blade was hidden behind his soft smile.

Otherwise, of course, he could never be fit to be the student council president of St. Garrardsworth Academy, and should not have been chosen by that <Holy Sword>, either.

...Much less, maintaining the rank #1 as such.

“It looks like you are really enjoying yourself, Ernest.”

The vice-president of St. Garrardsworth Academy, Laetitia Blanchard knocked at the door, very poorly if saying so, left open earlier.

“Oh, Laetitia. So you came.”

The young man — St. Garrardsworth Academy student council president, Ernest Fairclough raised his face and turned a refreshing smile toward Laetitia.

He was apparently watching the opened space window at hand.

“Oh my, are you perhaps watching the semifinal?”

“No, what I was watching was yesterday’s quarterfinal.”

“The quarterfinal...?”

At his answer, Laetitia tightly furrowed her eyebrows.

Roughly scratching her blond hair, that was a shade darker than Ernest's, Laetitia peered in the space window.

The Phoenix quarterfinal match, which took place yesterday, was certainly projected there. Due to the fierce battle between the players of Seidoukan and World Dragon, they became quite the

talk in Asterisk; also their next opponents were her companions from the same Silver Wings ^{Life Rhodes} Knights Squadron. It was no wonder that she was also interested.

It was no wonder, but Laetitia was slightly displeased with it.

“...Are you that much interested in that boy?”

“Fufufu. You can say that.”

At Laetitia’s indication Ernest frankly nodded.

“Geez... Be it her or you, why are you so much concerned with that child? I cannot understand.”

“Oh dear! The great you, who bears the nickname of the <Holy Woman>, shouldn't make such a face.”

Ernest laughed as he admonished Laetitia, who pouted.

“You become really childish when it comes to Miss Enfield.”

“Wha...!? T-That’s not true! That’s not true at all!”

Taking in sidelong glance at Laetitia, who denied his accusations with a bright red face, Ernest once again dropped his eyes down to his hand.

“Still, as expected, he is wonderful. If there is a foundational principle in swordsmanship it’s that it’s purely dignified. As a swordsman... I would by all means like to cross blades with him.”

“Ernest. I hope you will not be that reckless again...”

“I know. But, there's no problem if it's just talking, right?”

Ernest shrugged his shoulders with a wry smile.



That was what it meant to be chosen by the <Holy Sword>.

Be always virtuous, cast aside selfishness and act as the proxy of order and justice in all actions.

—That was the price requested by the
Demon Sword of the White Filter.^{Lei-Glems}

If a shadow was to lurk over this even a little, the Ogre Lux, with the nickname of <Holy Sword>, would mercilessly forsake its user. And he would also lose the nickname and qualifications of <^{Pendragon} Holy Knight>.

Such a thing could not possibly be allowed. It was probably the same not only for Laetitia, but also the other True Knights.

That power was necessary for the present Garrardsworth.

“Well, please rest assured. Though a one-on-one is impossible, if it’s just crossing swords, then it should come true in the near future. —In the next year’s Gryps.”

Laetitia said with a fearless smile.

“That boy should definitely participate in her team. That way, our teams will probably confront at some point. You would be able to fight to your heart’s content. And — of course, it would be us, who would emerge victorious!”

Laetitia tightly clenched her fist.

“*sigh*... It looks like you want to win against Miss Enfield no matter what.”

“...I admit that. Whatever happens... She's the only one I can't afford to lose to.”

That's right. She — Claudia Enfield — is the only person against whom I cannot lose. I will win this time.

I swear on my pride of <Witch of ^{Gloriara}Light Wings>, rank #2 of St. Garrardsworth Academy. Laetitia demanded of herself.

“Were you not satisfied with the last year Gryps? You had surely won there, haven't you?”

“We certainly won as a team... But, but!”

Laetitia remembered that scene of two years ago and thoroughly chewed her molars.

Although she achieved victory, as a team in that match, Laetitia's school badge was cut by Claudia's sword — that annoying Pan-Dora.

“That humiliation, I will never forget it...!”

Of course the reason, of not wanting to lose to Claudia, was not only that.

However, Laetitia's pride could forgive her to leave it like that.

“Hmm...”

As Ernest closed the space window, he erased his smile and pondered.

“But you know, I’m not interested in him just for that.”

“...Is there anything else?”

“It seems that Dirk Eberwein came in contact with him.”

“The <Tyrant>?”

Laetitia openly frowned.

Garrardsworth did not just have bad relations with Le Wolfe... It is also the case that Le Wolfe’s infamous student council president was, an opponent who could be said to be, the sworn enemy of Laetitia and company.

“I don’t know if he is associated with him, but there is also a report that he has moved the “cats”.”

“That... is not amicable.”

If the Intelligence operatives of Le Wolfe were moving, then it must be something that he could not ignore.

Except that it would not be made public, though, that is.

“It will be good if things go smoothly...” Said Ernest.

Ernest, his eyes tinged with anxiety, turned his gaze outside the window.

『"—T-This is also amazing! Player Sasamiya's blow is a splendid clean hit to player Rimsi! Of course, it was also the first time in this tournament that player Rimsi received an attack! Will the impregnable pair of Allekant finally collapse after coming so far?"

The voice of the live reporter rose in excitement to become exalted while the great cheers of the audience, who were even further excited, engulfed the stage.

In a corner of the stands, as usual Flora was cheering on the edge of her seat with an excited look.

"Both Sasamiya-sama and Toudou-sama are amazing!"

As the pure respect, admiration, and the thought of whether she could also one day become like them, were mixed in Flora's chest, she buzzingly waved her hands.

However, the highly strung spectators stood up one after another, and before one knew, the audience was currently all standing in unison.

Though Flora, who was of short stature, was buried (covered), she stood on the chair and was hopping up and down as she somehow managed to secure her field of vision, however—.

“...Hey”

A deep dark voice suddenly resounded directly behind Flora.

“Eh...?”

When Flora was about to turn around, a sharp shock ran through the back of her neck.

Not a single person among the surrounding spectators, who were entirely distracted by the excitement, noticed the sudden disappearance of the young girl's figure.

References

1. ↑ 抱: Bao Qan, it's a Chinese way of greeting; read also <http://describd.com/doc/132441461/Bao-Quan>
 2. ↑ it means that he was ignorant of the outside world, or he knew nothing aside from his own world
 3. ↑ by that, she means that he will become an opponent, who will be able to hold his ground against her
 4. ↑ brother as in disciples of a same master
 5. ↑ The word "chignon" comes from the French phrase "chignon du cou," which means nape of the neck. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chignon_%28hairstyle%29
 6. ↑ here, it means the 'pretension' knowledge and skills that one hastily learned
 7. ↑ Kenpō (拳?) is the name of several Japanese martial arts. The word kenpō is a Japanese translation of the Chinese word "quán f". This term is often informally transliterated as "kempo", as a result of applying Traditional Hepburn romanization,[1] but failing to use a macron to indicate the long vowel
 8. ↑ meaning that they come to cheer for them; well something like that
 9. ↑ French. Diminutive of poche pocket
 10. ↑ it means to say that she possessed a strong sense of duty
 11. ↑ here it means that he has to learn something that might be useful later
 12. ↑ I think it's saying that Taoshi is very versatile in switching from offensive to defensive and defensive to offensive, no matter which way it is
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13. ↑ I'm not really sure for the translation, but the raw is 肩, which means normally "shoulder massage coupon"
 14. ↑ 一: one point as in a kendo or a duel
 15. ↑ a Japanese sword
 16. ↑ a half-conscious state, seemingly between sleeping and waking, in which ability to function voluntarily may be suspended
 17. ↑ omurice, is a Japanese word for "omelet and rice". Seasoned fried rice is wrapped or topped by omelet
 18. ↑ mean here rotten people with no moral character.
 19. ↑ Lees refers to deposits of dead yeast or residual yeast and other particles that precipitate. Sometimes called 'dregs'.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lees_%28fermentation%29
 20. ↑ way to say father in Japanese
 21. ↑ as for the meaning of densho, read here <http://www.akban.org/wiki/Densho>
 22. ↑ he makes signs as in naruto-ish ninjutsu hand-signs
 23. ↑ It was when Kirin and Ayato were attacked by the pseudo-dragons of Allekant (Volume 2 chapter 6)
 24. ↑ Daughter of a high-class family
 25. ↑ Atelier is the French word for "workshop". <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atelier>
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